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THE MAN FROM NEW YORK: or, The Romance of a Rich Young Woman.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE SPOTTER DETECTIVE," "THE NEW YORK SHARP," "OVERLAND KIT," "INJUN DICK," ETC., ETC.



"WELL, PETERS, I'VE HAD A MIGHTY BAD RUN OF LUCK SINCE I LEFT THE EAST AND I AM DESPERATE, AND I TELL YOU, FRANKLY.
I WON'T GO BACK WITHOUT A STRUGGLE."

The Man From New York:

OR,

THE ROMANCE OF A RICH YOUNG WOMAN.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "WITCHES OF NEW YORK," "OVER-
LAND KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROB,"
"INJUN DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN EPISODE IN THE BLACK HILLS.

It was really a strange picture and one that could not be witnessed every day in the year, even in the wild, desolate, lawless region of which we write.

In a little valley in the Black Hills our story commences—a little valley a few miles from Deadwood, the "magic city," which, like a mushroom, has grown so enormously in so short a time.

Through the valley ran Spearfish creek, and, as considerable gold had been found in and near the stream, quite a little mining-camp had grown up in the valley.

Montana Bar the camp was named—first, because there was a sand-bar in the creek, just at the point where the camp had been planted, and secondly, because a mile or so up the stream there was a rich mining property, which was "panning" out extremely well, known as the Little Montana.

The mine was the property of a rich New Yorker, one Dick Van Dyke, an extremely eccentric individual, who was apparently without kith or kin in the world; in fact, when in his cups, (and he was a terribly hard drinker), he was often wont to declare that he was all alone in the world, a tub that stood upon its own bottom, and asked no favors from living soul.

Some thirty men—no women—composed the population of the camp, and nearly all of these thirty men, well-armed, and many of them brandishing weapons in their hands, were clustered around a man who sat on a tall stump, with his hands tied before him in an extremely secure manner.

The man was young, rough-looking, although his face was covered by a scrubby beard that evidently must alter the appearance of the features, and perhaps had he enjoyed the luxury of a clean shave the hangdog look would have disappeared. He was dressed, miner-fashion, roughly, and had evidently been well-armed, for his belt contained straps for two pistols.

Good cause had the honest miners of Montana Bar to glower at and threaten the stranger, if their suspicions were true that this rough-looking fellow was the notorious Johnny Reid, better known perhaps as Gentleman John, the leader of a band of road-agents who had levied toll in a most successful manner upon the pilgrims who traversed the narrow trails of the Black Hills.

Lately a determined effort had been made to hunt down the outlaws. A trap had been set for them; the road-agents had tumbled into it, and the result had been the defeat and death of nearly all the band. Those who had not fallen by the bullets of the Vigilantes had been pursued hotly by the avengers.

The leader of the band, Johnny Reid, was believed to have escaped the slaughter, for no one of the Vigilantes had recognized his person among the dead men, although in truth so well had the outlaw chief always disguised himself that it was no easy matter for any one to clearly identify him.

The pursuit after the fleeing men was hot, but fruitless, and at last the Vigilantes, giving up the chase, returned home, but on their march to the camp, by mistake they took a wrong trail which led them into the mountains, and there, in an obscure nook, they came upon a sleeping man, evidently worn out by fatigue.

Accident had accomplished what design could not, for in the sleeper the Vigilantes believed that they recognized the outlaw leader.

They had seized him at once, and, despite his desperate resistance, made him their prisoner.

And then, when they had bound him securely, in triumph they announced to him that they knew who he was and that when they got him to Montana Bar a short shrift and a long rope awaited him.

Vainly he protested that he was not the road-agent chief—that he was an innocent pilgrim, prospecting for gold in the mountain gulches.

"Whar are your tools?" they cried, for of course for a man to "prospect" after gold without tools was a clear impossibility.

"Why, my pardner's got 'em," he replied, innocently, and then he told what they all believed to be a "yarn" made out of whole cloth, about his partner and himself having separated, his partner to search for gold and he to kill game for subsistence.

The story was altogether "too thin," so the miners announced. They were well satisfied that they had got hold of the right man; during the chase, by an adroit "double," he had circled around and got in the rear of the men who were

chasing him so hotly, and believing himself safe from pursuit, had yielded to the demands of nature and allowed sleep to overtake him, being satisfied that he was in no immediate danger.

In great triumph they conducted the prisoner back to the mining-camp, and when the morning came, proceeded to put him through that peculiarly Western ceremony known as a Lynch trial.

The evidence was extremely strong, according to the crude ideas that the miners had on this subject. Two or three swore positively that they had seen Johnny Reid, had made his acquaintance, in fact, in a manner extremely disagreeable to themselves, as the outlaw on these occasions had literally stripped them of everything valuable, and that, although the road-agent's face was concealed by a black mask, they felt sure that the prisoner was the man.

The captive demanded a chance to cross-examine the witnesses, and did so in a manner that showed that he possessed no mean skill as a lawyer. In fact, he tore the testimony all to pieces, but it didn't help his case in the least, for the miners had made up their minds that he was guilty and that he ought to be hung, and the quicker the better. This is the usual mob logic.

The trial was a brief one, and the jury retired to deliberate, selecting the shelter of a scrubby oak, where they earnestly talked the matter over.

In the meantime, so sure was the crowd that the captive would suffer, that a dexterous fellow fixed up a hangman's rope and "shinned" up a tree to adjust it over a projecting branch.

And this was the picture of which we spoke: the prisoner seated upon the tree-stump, with his hands tied before him, an earnest look upon his face, and yet cool and collected, no thought of fear, though his last hour on earth seemed drawing fearfully near; the jury, deliberating under the shelter of the oak; the long-legged fellow in the background perched upon the tree-trunk, with the dangling rope, noosed at the end, ready for the prisoner's neck; a stalwart fellow with a cocked revolver keeping guard over the captive; and the miners grouped around, many of them with weapons out, as though they thought that the prisoner, bound and helpless, might at any moment make a desperate effort to escape.

And just at this moment, just as the jury had pretty nearly agreed that there wasn't any doubt about the prisoner's guilt, and that he had better swing as a warning to the evil-doers to beware of the wrath of the good men of Montana Bar, a new-comer appeared upon the scene who was destined to play quite a prominent part in it.

It was a man rather short in stature but stoutly built, dressed roughly and well-armed.

He came up the valley from the lower trail, and when he joined the crowd and caught a glimpse of the prisoner's face, he seemed much astonished.

At once he accosted an aged miner, who, seated upon a boulder, was eagerly waiting for the "hanging-match" to come off.

"Say, stranger, what's the matter here?" he exclaimed; "what's that man been doing, and are they going to string him up?"

"You bet!" replied the other, after a good stare at the new-comer; and then, perceiving that he was a stranger, the miner took it upon himself to relate all the particulars of the affair: the entrapping, and the defeat of the road-agents, their flight and pursuit of the Vigilantes, the unexpected capture of the prisoner, his story, and, in fact, left no particular untold.

Just as the miner finished his yarn, the jury came to a conclusion.

"Guilty," the foreman said; "we'll string him up right away and then we can go home to dinner." He was addressing his companions.

The jury advanced to where the prisoner sat, and every ear in the crowd was stretched to catch the sentence.

"Guilty!" cried the foreman, in a loud voice; "we're going to string you up, and may the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

"Hold on!" cried the new-comer, rushing forward; "gentlemen, this is all a mistake! That man ain't Johnny Reid no more than I am! He's my partner, and what he told you about my going off with the tools was all O. K. When I was asleep some fellow lit out with the plunder, and while I went to hunt him up, my pardner there got into this leetle difficulty, but I reckon that you'll see that you're barking up the wrong tree now. I don't ask you to take my word for this, but I offer you proof. I'll write my name then ask him what it is, and if he don't answer correctly, why then you can string me up, too!"

The stranger whipped out the stump of a pencil and scribbled his name on an old card that he chanced to have in his pocket.

"There—that's my handle," he said, handing his card to the veteran miner who, acting as Judge Lynch, was presiding over the ceremonies.

"Now put it to him!" the stranger cried.

"I reckon that I know the name of my old

partner, well enough!" the captive exclaimed; "although there wasn't any one of you would believe that I was giving you a square deal when I talked about him, and told you jest who and what I was. That's my chum, John Peters."

Judge Lynch and the members of the jury stared at each other. The prisoner was correct.

John Peters was the name penciled on the card, but they had a suspicion that there might be some deception about the matter; this man might be a pal of the road-agent.

"But who are you, anyway?" Judge Lynch asked.

"If you will give me five minutes' private conversation I think that I can satisfy you in regard to who and what I am," the man said, in reply to the question.

Judge Lynch at once signified that he had no objection to this, and the two men retired apart.

The conference was watched with a great deal of interest by the crowd, and by no one more intently than by the prisoner, upon whose face, despite his efforts to conceal it, appeared a puzzled expression.

The lookers-on, of course, could not overhear the conversation between the two, but they fancied that they could detect what was going on by observing the expression of their faces.

At first the judge appeared suspicious and reserved; the stranger talked rapidly; then the judge's face changed and he looked astonished; the other took from a secret, inside pocket, a big memorandum-book, crowded with papers that at the distance appeared like legal documents; some of these he handed to the judge for his perusal, and the scrutiny of the papers appeared to entirely remove the judge's doubts. He folded them up and returned them to the stranger with a polite bow; at which the crowd greatly wondered, for his honor, the judge, whether as judge or man, was not noted for his urbanity.

The interview was ended.

The judge turned and came back to where the prisoner sat, the stranger following at his heels.

"We've made a mistake, boys; untie his hands and let him go; this gentleman certifies for him and I certify for this gentleman!"

They released the prisoner and he stood up and stretched his limbs with a thankful air.

"Well, it was rough for me, gentlemen, but it would have been rougher if you had ornamented that tree with my precious carcass, but I don't bear any malice; mistakes will happen, but I hope you won't take it amiss if I get out of this hyer valley as soon as I can, for, after what I've gone through it ain't anything but natural that I should feel a leetle prejudiced against it."

The crowd laughed; it takes our wild western citizens to enjoy humor.

"Go long as soon as you please!" Judge Lynch replied, "and good luck go with you!"

Then the two nodded to the crowd, said "So long," and taking the southern trail soon disappeared from sight.

It was some time before either of the two spoke, fully fifteen or twenty minutes, and not until the little valley, wherein these events, that we have related, had taken place, was entirely out of sight.

"That was a narrow squeeze for you, partner," the man who had given his name as John Peters, remarked.

"Yes, ten minutes more and I would have stretched hemp sure," the other replied, a slight shudder passing over his muscular form.

"Well, you could almost have knocked me down with a feather when I saw that it was you, and realized the tight place you were in. It was about as neat a thing as I ever did—the trick by which I got you out. I felt sure that you would remember my name, but if they had asked me for yours, they would have had me, for I suppose you ain't traveling around in these diggings under your own appellation."

"Of course not; for the last year or so, I have been called Johnny Reid."

"Oh, then the Vigilantes had got hold of the right man?"

"Yes, and I presume that you want me on business too."

"Precisely; you're the man I've been hunting."

"Well, Peters, I've had a mighty bad run of luck since I left the East and I am desperate, and I tell you, frankly, I won't go back without a struggle."

"Oh, yes you will!" cried the other, "and I'll bet you dollars to cents on it!"

CHAPTER II.

THE HEIRESS OF A MILLION.

It was at the close of a dark, rainy, disagreeable August day that the look-out of the Cunard steamer, *Bothnia*, caught sight of the twin lights on the Highlands of Navesink, just lit to warn the ocean travelers that land was near.

The passage from England's tight little island had been an unpleasant one, something rare at this time of year; the skies had frowned constantly, and very little clear weather had been experienced during the voyage.

Naturally therefore the passengers, nearly

all of whom were returning from European pleasure trips, were delighted when the cry of "Land ho!" ran through the ship, and, despite the gathering darkness, they gathered on the deck, eager to catch a glimpse of the New World.

The steamer, being one of the favorite crafts of the Cunard line, had a full complement of passengers; there were the returning tourists who had gone abroad to see how far the old world exceeded the new, eager to behold the scenes with which books had made them familiar; the business men, who run across so often that to them an ocean trip seemed only a mere commonplace matter; the emigrants who had broken away from old ties and sought a new land to form fresh ones. And, amid this motley throng which comprised men and women of many nationalities, were two, evidently traveling in company, who attracted much attention—a middle-aged man, and a fair, sweet young girl.

The man was plainly a son of the Emerald Isle, his face and speech both betrayed it. Doctor O'Hoolihan he called himself; but although he dressed well, like a man whose income was a substantial one, and had an extremely soft, oily way with him, yet to the experienced eye, there were certain indications about the man which plainly proved that he was not a gentleman to fortune and position born, though he talked glibly enough about my lord this and the earl of that, and more than hinted that, notwithstanding his rather plebian-sounding name, he had noble blood in his veins. But an old and experienced man of the world would have set him down as an adventurer, a "party" whom it was wise to keep an eye upon.

But the girl, on the contrary, who was evidently under his protection, was a lady both by birth and breeding.

She was a delicate, lily-like creature, with great masses of golden hair and soft, gray-blue eyes, pretty and with an innocent child-like way about her. Although fully twenty she did not appear to be more than sixteen.

She was evidently in bad health; consumption, that fell destroyer, had plainly marked her for a victim in the opinion of the fellow-voyagers—who had noticed her, and, although she kept pretty well to the seclusion of her own state-room during the trip, yet she had ventured out enough to allow some few of the passengers to observe her, and two or three of the ladies on board had managed to scrape an acquaintance with her.

And there was one lady in particular who had taken a great interest in this fair girl, Alma Van Dyke, as she was called.

This lady was one of the peculiar type, who, although of not much real importance in the world, generally, by dint of brisk activity and vigorous pushing, manage to make themselves extremely conspicuous. She was Mrs. General George Washington Jones, the widow of a man, who, although really a general—there were many officers during our late war who won high grades, with very little active service—had achieved far more notoriety in the field of politics than on the plains of war. General Jones had been successful, had won political honors and the lucre which always seems to accompany them, although to men not in the ring, it is a mystery how an office-holder at two or three thousand dollars a year, can, after ten years' service, retire with a fortune of two or three hundred thousand.

And so it happened that Mrs. General Jones had an ample income, and being without children, had nothing to do but busy herself about other people's affairs.

She was a motherly, middle-aged lady, of commanding stature, dignified appearance, and with that peculiar way of doing things, so that what would have appeared to be impudent interference on the part of a meeker woman, only seemed to be friendly interest in her.

Mrs. Jones had been greatly attracted by the delicate young girl, and as she had but little to do at present, she amused herself by making the child the heroine of a most remarkable romance, and the joke of the thing was, that without in reality knowing aught of the girl, except her name, she felt sure that her surmise was entirely correct.

But on the evening when the welcome Highland lights appeared, seeing a chance, she determined to interview the girl.

Nearly all the passengers were gathered forward, and Miss Alma, seated in an easy-chair by the bulwarks aft, was entirely alone.

Mrs. General Jones improved the opportunity. Seating herself by the girl, she entered into conversation with her and after a little preliminary sparring, plunged at once at her pet idea.

"Do you know, my dear, that I have formed quite a romance about you?"

"Is it possible?" asked the girl in surprise.

"Oh, yes; I am such a giddy creature about such things. I took it into my head that you are not happy—that this Irish gentleman who accompanies you is more of a tyrant than a protector, that there is quite a little mystery connected with your life, and that instead of looking gleefully forward to a landing, as all

the rest of us do, you are moody and troubled, worried by apprehensions of dangers that threaten you from terrible, unseen foes."

A faint smile appeared on the girl's face as the lady finished.

"It is all romance, madam, and nothing more," she said. "The gentleman who accompanies me is simply an escort, that is all. I have been to school in England—was placed there by my father when I was only a little girl, and have remained there ever since; but now my father is dead and I have been called home so that his affairs may be settled up."

"Poor child! it is a dreadful thing to lose a father; but your mother, I presume, is living?"

"No, my mother died soon after I was born."

"How very sad! but I hope, my dear girl, that your father was a prudent man and left suitable provision for you?"

"Oh, yes; I am the sole heir."

"And you've got enough to support you comfortably?" persisted Mrs. Jones. "It would be a dreadful thing for such a child as you are to have to work for your living."

"Oh, yes; my father's lawyers, who wrote for me, told me that my father's death had made me an heiress."

"Who are the lawyers, dear? I know all the leading New York lawyers, and can tell you all about them?"

"Brevoort and Brevoort."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mrs. General Jones, in astonishment. "Why, your father must have been a man of property if the Brevoorts attended to his affairs. They are one of the leading law-firms of the city. What was your father's name, dear? Perhaps I knew him—"

"Martin Van Dyke!"

Mrs. General Jones gave a little scream of astonishment.

"Martin Van Dyke, the Wall street banker?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

"And he was your father, and you are his sole heir?"

"Yes."

"Why, my dear girl, you are worth a million!" and the lady could hardly open her eyes wide enough in amazement, as she announced this fact. "I saw the notice of his death in the newspapers, and it was stated at the time that his fortune amounted to at least a million of dollars, and to think that I should be imagining all sorts of foolish things about your future—why, it's all rose-colored, my love. The Brevoorts are splendid men, both father and son; they'll treat you like a princess!"

And so the woman rattled on, Alma listening with a smile.

She hoped the words would come true, and yet there was a weight at her heart. She, too, had dreamed of danger—danger in her own native land.

But then she was ill, and sick people have strange fancies.

CHAPTER III.

A LIMB OF SATAN.

"MR. GRAY, you are a limb of Satan, if ever there was one in this world, and if you don't come to be hanged one of these days I shall be very much astonished!"

The speaker was a stout, elderly gentleman, dressed faultlessly in black, as neat and precise in his appearance as though he had just stepped out of a band-box. His face was a peculiar one; both forehead and chin retreated, and the nose, which was an extremely large one, projected, so that the profile really bore a great likeness to the face of a bird of prey, and the cruel little eyes, that twinkled on each side of the enormous nose, rather added to this impression.

But it was really a ridiculous idea, for this gentleman was the head of the old and eminently respectable legal firm of Brevoort and Brevoort.

A firm of more solid standing did not exist in all of great New York, although neither one of the partners—there were two, Alexander Brevoort, the father, and Jason Brevoort, the son—ever did much legal pleading; they confined themselves almost entirely to what is known as Chamber practice; real estate business, placing money on bond and mortgage, the care of estates and trust funds, etc. An extremely lucrative business the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort enjoyed, too, so the world said; and from the well-fed appearance of the old lawyer, even a close and careful observer would have certainly been impressed with the idea that the Brevoorts were a pretty safe firm to intrust with any legal business that came in their line.

But what character in this world so pure that envious doubt does not assail it? What man so honest and good as to be free from enemies, and safe against the voice of slander?

Alas! the tongue of malice spareth none in this life of ours.

Even Brevoort and Brevoort had enemies; "legal friends whose gains, perhaps, we have interfered with," the old gentleman was wont to remark, when the question came up.

And these friends one time had applied to the highly respectable firm a nickname that had stuck sorely.

"Brevoort and Brevoort, the Owls of New York, birds of prey, that in silence, darkness and stealth fatten on their unhappy clients."

But this of course was all sheer envy—professional jealousy, but the name never left the firm after it was once applied, and when one legal gentleman spoke to another learned light of the bar, and referred to the "Owls of New York," an explanation as to what firm was meant was never necessary.

The scene which we are about to describe was taking place in the Owls' outer office. The Brevoorts occupied a commodious set of apartments in one of the finest buildings on lower Broadway.

The person addressed by the elder Brevoort, in this somewhat peculiar manner, was a young man about twenty-five or six; a tall, well-built fellow, with rather a rakish expression upon his face. As men go nowadays, he was decidedly dashing-looking, although his costume was not remarkable for its elegance; but as he was only a lawyer's clerk on ten dollars per week, he could not be expected to dress like a Fifth avenue fop. But, despite the plainness of his dress, he was a man that would have attracted attention anywhere, for he had handsome features, large brown-black eyes, sharp and keen enough to look through an inch board, apparently; a peculiar mode of wearing his brown-black hair, which curled slightly; instead of cropping it closely to the skull, after the fashion most favored by the young men about town, he allowed it to grow quite long.

He had been writing at his desk when his employer entered, and the old Owl was evidently in a passion, and as the clerk turned to give the customary morning salute to the venerable gentleman, that worthy "opened" upon him as we have described.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Gilbert Gray, you are a limb of Satan!" the old lawyer repeated, in a rage. "You will be hung one of these days, I know you will, and I will come and see you."

"Well, sir, I sincerely hope you will, if you think that you will enjoy the sight; but respected Mr. Brevoort, will you allow your humble servant to command, to ask what he has done—wherefore these tears, etc.?"

The cool impudence of the young man astounded the old lawyer for a moment, although he was used to Gray's peculiar style.

That remarkably self-possessed individual was a source of wonder to the rest of the inmates of the office who derived their subsistence from the Owls, for he took liberties that none of the rest of them dared to venture upon, but the reason for this was covertly hinted at. Gray had been with the firm for quite a number of years, ever since he was a boy in fact, and the other clerks believed that he had, in the course of his duties, picked up a thing or two in regard to the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort, which neither of the partners would have liked to have made public.

"Where were you last night, sir?" thundered the old Owl, after he had recovered from the astonishment that the coolness of the young man imposed.

"Last night?" and Gray appeared to reflect, as if his memory was at fault.

"Yes, sir, last night!"

"Home, sir, as a virtuous and well-conducted young man ought to be," the clerk replied, with a charming smile.

"Then what is the meaning of this report of a disgraceful fight in an up-town billiard-room, given in the *Herald* this morning, wherein it is stated that a young legal gentleman, thinking himself imposed on by a gang of sharpers, turned upon them and absolutely cleared the place single-handed after a most desperate fight, and the article concludes with the remark that when the sporting men tackled an *Owl*, they had no idea he would turn out such a *bird of prey*. It was you, sir, wasn't it? By Jove, sir, you've got a black eye now!" And the old gentleman put on his glasses, the better to observe it.

Under Mr. Gray's left eye there was a slight mark.

"Yes, sir, run against a lamp-post in the dark last night," the clerk replied, with a most innocent face.

The old lawyer groaned.

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Gray, keep out of the newspapers, whatever you do. There must be no more of such doings!"

"No, sir! but such little things will happen to a man in New York," replied Gray, in the most submissive yet emphatic tone in the world, but there was something in his face and voice which plainly betrayed that he didn't care two cents, as the saying is, for the old lawyer's report.

"By the way, Mr. Gray, Miss Van Dyke arrived last night."

"Yes, I saw the notice in the *Herald* that the steamer had got in."

"If you remember, I purchased a pleasure-yacht, a few weeks ago."

"Yes, sir, and I was never more astonished in my life than when I heard of it. You are not the kind of man that I should fancy would enjoy such a thing."

"Ah, you mistake; I am very fond of the water. Well, I have not had an opportunity of

trying her yet, but I think of taking a trip down the harbor to-night. My son arrived this morning from Cuba."

"Glad to hear it," and Gray looked the astonishment that he felt. For nearly a year the younger member of the firm had been absent, but where he had gone and upon what business not a soul in the office knew.

Something important, of course, and yet no letters had ever come from him—none to the office at any rate, and, as far as the office knew, the senior partner never wrote to him. It was an extremely mysterious affair and all the Owl's satellites were greatly puzzled by it, and now, as suddenly and unexpectedly as he had departed, Jason had returned.

"Yes, and as he is an expert yachtman I think of getting him to sail her to-night. Miss Van Dyke will accompany us, and as I haven't got any crew I thought of asking you office gentlemen to volunteer."

"I for one will be delighted, and I am quite sure the rest will be, also."

"The yacht lies off the Battery, the Princess. You have a yachting suit, I presume?"

"No, sir, I have never had any use for that article. That is a luxury that a man on ten dollars per week can manage to get along without," the clerk replied, with a grimace.

"Ah, yes, but we must do the thing up in style. I don't wish Miss Van Dyke to get a mean opinion of us. Here's fifty dollars," and the old lawyer placed the bills in Gray's hand. "I'll take you, Jerry and Whalebone; now with this money you procure appropriate suits for all of you."

And the old gentleman passed into the inner office leaving the clerk perfectly astounded.

"Fifty dollars to rig us three up!" he exclaimed. "Why, what on earth is the old man up to? This liberality will be the death of him!" And with this observation Mr. Gray returned to his work.

CHAPTER IV.

ON BOARD THE PRINCESS.

PROBABLY no more delightful trip can be had in the world than a sail down New York bay, particularly on a bright moonlight night when the silver mistress of the night is high in the heavens and her rays render the night as light as the day.

And such a sail Brevoort and Brevoort gave the orphan heiress.

The "Princess" got under way about eight o'clock; there was a fair wind and being a swift sea-boat, the yacht soon left Castle Garden wall behind.

The Princess was a good-sized boat, rating some twenty tons burden, but whatever possessed the old Owl to invest in such a thing was a mystery, for he was about the last man in the world to aspire to a sea-rover's laurels.

But he had bought the yacht and engaged a sailing-master, whose sole business it was to look after the craft, for constant attention was necessary.

This sailing-master was a fine old sea-dog, Burt Clement by name, with a hairy face, a rasping voice and a walk like an elephant.

Mr. Clement was an able seaman, had served his time before the mast and from the forecastle had risen to the quarter-deck, but the veteran had one sad fault that interfered materially with his worth as a sailing-master. He drank like a fish, and when he was half-seas-over, which state he always got into if it was possible for him to get liquor, he was no more fit to take charge of a vessel than he was to manage a balloon.

Brevoort had been warned of the fault before he had engaged the old tar, but, singularly enough, he made light of the matter, although generally the most particular and careful man in regard to any such thing.

"Well, well," he said, "all seamen drink more or less, you know; I suppose they require liquor, being so much on the water."

This was almost the nearest to a joke that the old Owl was ever known to come.

And the sailing-master—being such a man, his delight, when the stores for the trip were put on board and he saw that a whole basket of champagne had been provided, was wonderful.

Mr. Brevoort had got together quite a little party for the trip. There was his son, Jason, who had just returned from a foreign trip, as his bronzed face amply testified, a tall, well-built young man, with a very Frenchified mustache and imperial, dressed in faultless style in a superb yachting suit, and he looked every inch a sailor with his bronzed face and muscular form; then Gray, got up regardless of expense, thanks to the liberality of the old Owl; Jerry Blake, the office-boy, a lad of fifteen or sixteen—a regular imp of mischief as most office boys are; and the colored porter who took care of the Brevoort office, a coal-black negro, so black that charcoal could have made a white mark upon him, so his detractors said. He rejoiced in an extremely peculiar name, Popgun Whalebone, and he was as jolly and independent a 'coon as one would find in all the city. The Irish Doctor, O'Hoolihan, with the heiress, Alma, completed the party.

The run down the harbor was an extremely

pleasant one, and as the wind was good soon the Princess left the green hills of Staten Island, passed through the Narrows, glided by the massive Highlands of Navesink, and the low point of Sandy Hook and floated upon the broad Atlantic beyond.

"I guess we will run down the coast as far as Long Branch," Mr. Brevoort remarked. "Long Branch looks beautiful from the sea, I am told, by night."

About the first thing that the old Owl had done after the yacht got well under way was to open the basket of champagne in the cabin, and in the most generous manner he told the guests to help themselves and not to stand upon any ceremony; and to do the able seaman, the efficient clerk, the lively office boy, the colored porter, and the Irish doctor, full justice they obeyed the injunction to the letter, and the result was that the old sea-dog got "under the weather" before Sandy Hook was

But it didn't make much difference; he knew what he was about and could steer as well drunk as sober; and, muddled with liquor as he was, he had still a seaman's instinct in regard to the weather, and when he heard old Brevoort speak about running outside down along the coast he shaded his eyes with his hairy paw, just as if the moon dazzled him, and took a good squint to the south-east.

"I thought so," he growled, and then he beckoned to the old lawyer. Brevoort came up to him.

"Goin' to run down to the Tavern-houses?" he asked.

By this term the seamen used to the Jersey coast have designated Long Branch for the last thirty years.

"Long Branch you mean?"
"The very hidental!"
"Yes, I think so; it will be a pleasant trip."

"Do you see them clouds a-risin' to the south-ard?"

Brevoort looked in the direction indicated by Clement.

Sure enough there was a low bank of clouds perceptible.

"Well, what of it?"
"Them clouds means mischief, gov'nor."

"Oh, well, if a storm threatens we can put about and run for the bay. There's ample shelter in the cabin. I hardly think it will amount to anything, though."

"All right, gov'nor, jest as you say; it's your boat; you're the capt'n onto her, an' you kin run her to blazes, if you choose. There ain't no call for me to grumble. I'm an able seaman, I am, and I've fuddled the water, man and boy, for nigh onto forty years, an' you never ketches me to open my mouth ag'in' the skipper's orders; I'm too old a seaman for that. 'Obey orders if you break owners,'—is the sailor's motto, and I'm no land-lubber nor green-hand; I know my dooty an' I never goes back onto it!"

With that obstinacy peculiar to drunken men, Burt had taken it into his head that he mustn't dispute the will of his employer after having given him, as he supposed, sufficient warning that a heavy storm was approaching, and that unless the vessel was immediately put about and a run for the harbor made, the most imminent danger threatened.

But Brevoort didn't understand it in this way. He thought the warning of the sailor was but the idle talk of a man whose brains were addled by liquor, and he could not comprehend that, from the bank of clouds gathering low down in the south-east, a storm would come sufficient to make the stoutest ships quail.

A storm at sea sometimes rises with almost incredible rapidity.

Brevoort dismissed the warning words of the old sea-dog at once from his mind, and walked along the deck to where his son, Jason, was sitting on a camp-stool by the bulwarks, forward of the cabin.

Miss Van Dyke, who was seated aft, was being entertained by Gray, who had suddenly conceived a great liking for the girl, as she was polite, pleasant, and treated him as an equal. Gray had prevailed upon the negro and Jerry to sing, and as they both possessed excellent voices, and were used to singing together, some charming melody resulted.

The old lawyer saw that there was an opportunity to speak a few words to his son without danger of any one overhearing the conversation. So, helping himself to a camp-stool, he sat down beside the young man.

"I say, dad!" exclaimed Jason, suddenly, "what are you up to?"

The old Owl made a grimace as much as to implore caution, took a rapid glance to be sure that there was not any one near enough to overhear, and then replied, cautiously:

"My dear boy, the firm of Brevoort is in a very critical state just now."

"The deuce it is!"
"It is a most lamentable fact; for ten years, now, I have been speculating heavily, and the tide has gone against me all the time. My own money went the first year, and since that time I have been using this girl's, Alma's, fortune in a desperate endeavor to make myself whole; she has come here now to receive her money

and I haven't a dollar left to give her; her million is all gone! Not only that, but I have forged paper afloat to the extent of twenty thousand dollars; in a month that paper comes due, and if I don't take it up, the doors of Sing Sing will probably open to receive me."

"Well, you are in a pretty bad scrape, and to use the now classic saying—what are you going to do about it?"

"Desperate diseases demand desperate remedies," the old Owl whispered. "I have arranged a plan to ward off the danger, and perhaps escape it altogether. The girl must never reach the shore alive; she is in a delicate state of health, growing weaker and weaker all the time; the yacht is fixed for destruction; before midnight she will be the prey of the flames. Once Alma Van Dyke is dead, I can breathe again; I can stave off the settlement of the estate; I can take up my forged notes, for I have insured her life for fifty thousand dollars, and the moment she is dead I can collect the money."

CHAPTER V.

THE OWLS IN COUNCIL.

"By Jove, dad, you have got a head!" Jason exclaimed, in amazement and admiration.

"Well, my dear boy, it is not likely that I am called the owl for nothing," the old lawyer replied, complacently. He did not object to the nickname which had been bestowed upon him in the least; in fact, he took it as a compliment. To be called the owl implied that he was a man of cunning and sagacity.

"But, dad, isn't there a great deal of risk in this little scheme of yours?" asked Jason, after a moment's reflection.

"Of course there is risk; 'nothing venture, nothing win.' It's a very old adage, Jason, and a very true one. But notwithstanding the danger I am not sorry that the time has come to try it. For the past ten years I have been living on the crest of a volcano—living in deadly fear that at any moment an explosion might take place that would hurl me to utter ruin."

"I can easily understand that the situation is not a pleasant one, but I say you've managed to keep matters pretty quiet. I thought that I always possessed your entire confidence, but I had no suspicion of this."

"You knew that I was speculating in stocks and mines?"

"Oh, yes, but I always supposed that you were handling them gingerly and cautiously."

"My boy, when you once get involved in such speculations, you get in deeper than you intend almost without knowing it," the old man replied, soberly. "I was prudent at first, and I thought that I possessed an immense advantage in being backed by so large a capital, for the entire Van Dyke property was at my command, being composed mainly of Government bonds, stocks, etc., upon which I could easily raise money without exciting any suspicions. I got in deeper and deeper. I thought that the capital I controlled would enable me to 'bull' the market and keep up prices in spite of the real value of things, but there were other men, operating for a fall, who had money as well as I; and then, too, circumstances favored a falling market, for the panic struck in and caught me loaded up with more than I could carry. For months I struggled on, hoping against hope; little by little I saw my own fortune swept away, and the Van Dyke million followed. Ever since the days of the panic I have had all I could do to keep my head above water and sustain my credit, but lately I have been pushed pretty hard, and to keep from going to the wall I had no other resource than to issue bad paper. Of course I found no difficulty in getting rid of it; my name stands high in Wall street, although it is known down there that I have had terrible losses, and it is a mystery to the 'street' how I stand it, but of course my wealth is greatly overestimated, and the firm front that I have presented makes all believe that I am financially strong. For a long time I have been groping in the dark, seeking some way to escape from the terrible trap into which I have fallen, for the end must come some time, you know. This paper of mine comes due soon and I must raise the money to meet it or else either the State Prison at Sing Sing or a disgraceful flight to some foreign land with which the United States has no extradition treaty, is before me."

"And so you hit upon this scheme to make yourself whole?" Jason asked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and it will work; I am sure that it will work!" the father replied, in a tone full of confidence. "I have been planning the details of the affair for nearly a year. I had no difficulty at all in securing the life assurance, for at the time Alma was in perfect health; it is only within the last two months that this illness has come on."

"But, why risk this deed, when within a short time natural causes will be very sure to end her life?" Jason asked, with a glance at the ailing girl, who did not indeed seem to have a very firm hold on life.

"I can't wait, Jason, I can't wait!" the old man cried, nervously. "I must have money soon or else my true financial condition will become known to all. I cannot stave off a settlement

off much longer. If you had not acted like a fool, Jason, you might have been a great deal of help to me, long ago."

"Ah, but, dad, you never treated me well," the son answered, coolly. "In the law-firm of Brevoort and Brevort I was supposed to be an equal partner, but what was the true state of affairs? I did two-thirds of the work and received a quarter of the profits. Naturally I got disgusted, and so when I got my hands on a leetle matter of ten thousand dollars, I emigrated."

"You were extremely foolish: you should have expostulated with me and I would have done better by you."

"Oh, I was tired of that sort of thing!" Jason exclaimed, carelessly. "I had the ten thousand dollars safe in my hands and I was determined to have a good time for once in my life. I knew very well that you wouldn't be apt to make any trouble about it."

"But what good did the money do you?" cried the old man, testily; "it's all gone now."

"Yes, but I had a heap of fun while it lasted."

"Well, we'll let bygones be bygones, and look to the future. After this one operation is completed, you shall have half of all we make."

"And how much in this little affair?"

"Five thousand dollars the moment I receive the insurance money."

"That's fair enough; it's a bargain, dad; I'm with you; but don't you think there is too much risk about this affair? Fifty thousand dollars is a pretty large sum of money, you know, and these insurance companies are always ugly if there's the slightest chance for success in disputing a claim."

"Leave that to me!" the old man exclaimed, confidently; "I have thought about that and reflected upon the matter deeply. In the first place, no one company carries a large risk. I have insured her in twenty different companies for twenty-five hundred dollars apiece, and the companies won't make a fight about a small sum like that if everything appears straight and above-board, and the way I have arranged it, it will appear so."

"That's very true; your reasoning is correct there."

"Now then listen to the plan—to the story of Alma Van Dyke's death as the world at large will hear it. The orphan heiress arrives from England at night; the beautiful bay of New York, which she has heard so much about and which she has such a longing to see escapes her vision on account of the darkness. To me she laments this fact, and I, prompt to do anything to please the young lady who is the heiress of a million, immediately arrange for a trip down the bay, and in order to make the affair more pleasant, arrange to sail down in the afternoon and return at night so as to afford her a moonlight view. I am moved to arrange this little excursion by the fact that she is decidedly out of health and that I think the trip will do her good. There is motive enough for the excursion, eh?"

"Oh, yes."

"Anything suspicious about it?"

"Nothing at all."

"Well, we get under way; we have a pleasant sail down the bay, and in order that the heiress shall be well cared for, I have even brought the doctor along, whom I sent to England to escort her home."

"Doctor!" and Jason laughed; "he looks more like a card-sharper."

"Oh, he is a doctor, safe enough, although not a particularly good one nor a particularly honest one, but he answers my purpose, for he's a blundering fool for all his apparent shrewdness."

"More fool than knave, eh?"

"Yes; he's a strange compound of both, but the fool predominates; but to go on with my explanation. We run clear outside Sandy Hook; we go where it's rough, so that Miss Alma is compelled to go below. I accompany her, of course, and when I get her safely in the cabin I suggest a wine-lemonade; there will be no difficulty about getting her to drink for she has implicit faith in me. The lemonade will be drugged—a powerful narcotic will be infused into it which at once will throw her into a trance so like death that only a close examination will detect the difference. The moment she is insensible, I will rush on deck with the cry that she is dead."

"Dead, eh?" interposed Jason, reflectively.

"Yes; of course the natural result of such information will cause an immediate desire on the part of all to look at the dead girl. You will meet them at the cabin door with the cry that the vessel is on fire."

"A very dramatic episode!"

"Extremely so! Everything is prepared, there is a lager bier keg on board filled with coal oil, I tapped it just as soon as we got under way, and the result is that it has been slowly leaking ever since, so that the wood-work around it is well saturated with the oil and will burn like tinder the moment a match is applied. The source of fire is, of course, the stove in the forward cabin in which a fire has been kindled so as to give Miss Alma a cup of

tea. Through some gross carelessness the stove was not properly secured and tumbled over; you happened to be attracted below by the smell of something burning and found the forward cabin in flames. That is your story."

"Very plausible indeed."

"Of course under the circumstances there will be a panic. There is only one boat, and not a very large one either: everybody will make a rush for that, and I don't think there is a soul on board who will think for a moment of the dead girl in the cabin."

"No, of course not. There is not the slightest doubt about that. You have planned the affair in a most admirable manner, and I don't see a single chance of failure."

"Neither do I, and I feel as sure of fingering that fifty thousand dollars insurance money as though I held it in my hand now."

"And with that money you can take a fresh start."

"Yes, and I feel sure that I can retrieve my fortunes; the tide has turned now; it is flood, and the whole country is floated onward to a prosperity such as it has not known since the flush times of the war."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN FROM NEW YORK SHOWS HIS TEETH.

AND while the details of the horrid scheme were being arranged between the two "Owls," Alma, the orphan heiress, was deriving a great deal of enjoyment from the trip, thanks to the lively wit of Mr. Gray, and the glee of Jerry and the negro.

Although in ill-health yet the girl was far from death's door, for she had the abundant vitality of a young and vigorous constitution to draw upon, and, with proper care, there was no doubt that a long life was before her.

Gray, with his extremely entertaining ways, had made quite a favorable impression upon the young girl, and as the clerk, thanks to the old Owl's money, had got himself up regardless of expense, she had no idea, of course, that he was nothing but a humble drudge of the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort—not that it would have made much difference, for there was no purse-proud pride about her, but she would, naturally, have been a little more reserved.

The clerk, on his part, was in the seventh heaven of delight; Alma was a beautiful girl; she treated him as if he was a prince of the blood, and wild, foolish ideas had sprung up in the heart of the young man. To frankly reveal the truth in the matter, Mr. Gray had been partaking extremely freely of the champagne so liberally provided by the old lawyer.

Soon after starting Mr. Brevoort had taken Gray down into the cabin and got him to open the basket of wine, and then, in the most benevolent manner, had invited him to help himself to all he wanted; and Gray was not in the least bashful about availing himself of the invitation.

In fact, he attacked the wine vigorously. It was not often that he got such a chance. The champagne was the best that money could buy, and Gray rather prided himself upon his judgment in such matters, although the truth was that he never had many opportunities to become an expert.

The wine made another man of the poor clerk, and for the time being he felt as if he was the lord of half the world.

Gray was not so much under the influence of the wine as to render it perceptible to the young girl, although she got the idea that he was an extremely merry and lively gentleman, but the old Owl had his eyes upon the clerk, and when he saw him excuse himself to Alma and make another descent into the cabin, he got alarmed.

"If that infernal idiot drinks much more of that champagne he will get so drunk that he won't know what he is doing, and then he may frighten the girl with his antics," he said to Jason.

"Let us go after him and put a stop to it," the son suggested.

"A good idea; come on."

And the two descended into the cabin.

"Aha!" Gray exclaimed, upon beholding the pair, "you are just in time, gentlemen, to join me in a social glass."

The old Owl scowled, and the young one looked stern, but Gray never noticed the expression upon their faces at all; he filled three glasses and pushed two of them along toward the father and son.

"There you are, gentlemen; the beakers are brimming with the pure juice of the grape which exhilarates and does not intoxicate, and I'll give you a toast. Here's to Old Nick, the patron saint of all lawyers!" and he tossed down the glass of wine at one swallow.

Brevoort could refrain no longer.

"Mr. Gray, allow me to tell you that this conduct on your part is reprehensible in the highest degree!" he cried, indignantly.

"Respected head of the old and established—the eminently honest and upright firm of Brevoort and Brevoort, lawyers, etc., etc., etc., what on earth has your humble slave done to merit your displeasure?" Gray exclaimed, as cool as an iceberg, and he filled out another glass of wine as he spoke.

"You infernal rascal! to swill down my wine as if it was water—wine that cost three and a half a bottle!" cried the old Owl in a rage.

"Didn't you tell me to help myself to all I wanted, and ain't I doing it to the best of my ability?" And Gray winked one eye knowingly at his employer as he drank the wine that he had poured out.

"Put you are disgracing me, sir—you are disgracing my office!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Gray, suddenly becoming extremely merry; "well, that is a joke—that's a rich one, the best of the season; the idea of my disgracing the office of the Owls, as if such a thing was possible, no matter what I do!"

"You are insolent!" cried the old man.

"Why don't you discharge the rascal?" Jason exclaimed.

"No more rascal than you are!" cried Gray, fiercely, turning upon the young Owl; "and I want you to understand that I don't allow any one to abuse me. Your respected parent does not *dare* to discharge me. I know too much. I could a tale unfold' that would be apt to mightily astonish the good people of New York. Since you have been away, my bold Jason, your respected dad has been obliged to put things in my way, that undoubtedly wouldn't have come there if you had staid in the office, and I've picked up some little knowledge on my own hook, too. If you doubt, question me!" And Gray glared in triumph from one to the other, as he uttered the defiance.

"Oh, this is perfectly outrageous!" exclaimed old Brevoort, considerably astonished, a little alarmed and terribly enraged.

"Outrageous! so are all your doings!" Gray replied, hotly; "you're a regular old fraud, and you have been for years! I know all about you from beginning to end. You ain't worth a dollar in the world; you are terribly involved and you are reckoning upon this little scheme, of which this trip is one of the features, to pull you through."

"Oh, we have a little scheme, then?" remarked old Brevoort, assuming a calmness which he was far from feeling, for so incensed was he at Gray's conduct that he had an insane desire to take him by the throat and strangle him.

"Yes, and you think that I don't know what it is, but I do!" replied Gray, triumphantly.

"Oh, you do!"

"If you drink a bottle or two more of champagne, there won't be anything in the world that you won't know," remarked Jason, sarcastically.

"And what is our little scheme?" asked the old Owl. "Won't you have the kindness to explain it to us so that we will know all about it? We really feel curious."

"Will you answer a question or two first?"

"Oh, certainly; of course; anything to oblige you, Mr. Gray," remarked the old lawyer, in his most sarcastic manner.

"What has become of the girl's—Alma Van Dyke's—fortune? How much is there left of her million?"

In spite of old Brevoort's iron-like nerves, he could not prevent a shade of annoyance from passing over his face. Gray, it was evident, did possess a great knowledge of his affairs—more knowledge than he could have believed it possible for the clerk to acquire.

"You don't answer the question," Gray observed, after a moment's silence, finding that the old Owl was not inclined to speak. "I'll answer it for you, and I can, too, correctly. It's all gone; there isn't any of it left, and now she's come from England expressly to have a settlement of her affairs, and that puts you in the hole, don't it? The heiress is here—she wants her money and you haven't got it to give to her, and now what are you going to do about it, eh?"

"Well, as you seem to be so intimately acquainted with my affairs, perhaps you can tell us about that also?" the old lawyer replied.

"I can make a shrewd guess at it and I'll bet about all I've got in the world, although that ain't much, that I'm correct, too!" Gray retorted. "The girl wants her money; you haven't got it, but you've got a fine-looking son. In place of giving her the fortune you marry her to Jason here, and of course he can fix the money matter all right with her; he can explain that the money is all securely invested and that it had better not be disturbed, and in this manner you'll tide over the storm that threatens to wreck your fortunes. Oh, I've kept my eyes open! I knew that you wouldn't have summoned my bold Jason there home unless you needed his help terribly bad. I've noticed how he has been paying particular attention to the girl ever since she came on board."

The old lawyer drew a long breath when Gray finished; an awful weight had been lifted from his mind. When Gray uttered his bold defiance he had been tormented by a fearful suspicion; he feared lest, in some mysterious manner, the clerk had managed to guess the truth in regard to the dreadful scheme which he had in view, and now that he found Gray, with all his cunning, was so far astray, he felt most decidedly relieved.

"You are a very shrewd fellow, Mr. Gray,"

the old Owl observed, in his quiet, oily way, "I begin to perceive that I have never done you justice; you ought to have a better position in my office than the one you now occupy. I must see about it. And now, Mr. Gray, to come at once to business: without admitting that what you have stated is the truth, I presume that you will be willing to act with us in this matter—of course for a consideration?"

"No, sir," replied Gray, promptly; "I'm against you, tooth and nail!"

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, sir; I've fallen in love with the girl myself."

Both the Owls laughed.

"Perhaps you think that it is only the champagne that is talking," Gray continued, "but I tell you it is an honest fact. I'm after the girl and I'm going to have her if I can get her."

"Well, Mr. Gray, we won't interfere with you if you won't with us," the old lawyer said. "Let the fight be fair, and if you win her, why, we'll talk over the money business hereafter; I feel sure that we can compromise the matter."

And so the interview ended.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW THE PLOT WAS CARRIED OUT.

AFTER delivering his ultimatum Gray returned to the deck of the yacht, and when he was gone the two lawyers looked at each other, inquiringly. Each wished to see what the other thought about the matter.

The son was the first to speak.

"Clever as Mr. Gray thinks himself, he has not penetrated our design," he said.

"Ah, to do that he must be more than mortal!" the old lawyer exclaimed.

"Well, what do you think about the matter? Won't Gray's suspicions be excited when the fire takes place? Won't he suspect that there is something wrong, and that we have a hand in it?"

"Let him suspect all he likes; he can't prove anything; besides, if he keeps on drinking, the chances are that he will be helpless when the fire does take place, and in such an excitement of terror as that event will produce, there is a probability that he will be forgotten, and if he is down below asleep, as will most likely be the case, no one will think of saving him."

"That's very true; and between you and me, father, I think the quicker we get him out of the way the better, for I see he is inclined to be ugly and make trouble."

"If everything goes all right and our little scheme succeeds, as I feel sure it will, we must take measures to shut Mr. Gray's mouth, provided he escapes the peril which, before this night is over, he must encounter."

"How do you propose to arrange that little matter?" asked Jason, thoughtfully.

"Oh, there are twenty different ways, and smart as Mr. Gilbert Gray thinks himself, I will bet a trifle I can snare him so that he will be as helpless as a rat in a trap," the old Owl replied. "A trick can be so arranged that marked money can be found on his person and strong suspicions raised as to his honesty. Of course after such a charge is made against him—we don't push it, you know, but let him go on account of his being in our office so long—anything he may allege against us will seem only the result of malice consequent upon his discharge."

"Yes, that will be apt to shut him up pretty effectively."

A few more words of small import followed; then the two ascended to the deck.

By this time the moon was fully up and made the night beautiful with its rays.

The heiress was delighted, and although she had noticed the dark clouds gathering in the south-east, yet she had no apprehension of danger.

The yacht was well outside and as the sea, giving fair notice of the coming storm, was beginning to run high, the motion of the vessel soon became unpleasant.

The girl did not mind it, for she had got to be quite a sailor during her trip from Europe, but the Irishman, who had eaten and drank to repletion, the negro porter, and Jerry, the office-boy, neither one of whom had neglected the pleasures of the unaccustomed feast, soon succumbed to the influence of Neptune. With pale faces and uncertain steps they went below, and the energetic yet doleful manner in which they all cursed the sea and the unlucky hour when they were tempted to trust their precious persons upon its bosom was extremely amusing to Gray, who as yet had not been afflicted.

With cheerful words he endeavored to "brace" them up, as he termed it. He reminded Jerry of the many times he had boasted that he was a regular old sea-dog, and was more at home on the water than on the land; recalled to the mind of the Irish doctor his wonderful stories of the perils which he had encountered and overcome on the bosom of the briny deep, and wondered at the negro who, according to his own account, had been chief cook and bottle-washer of a trading vessel on the Virginia coast.

On this occasion sea-sickness was productive of the truth, for all three of these worthies admitted that their yarns were made out of whole

cloth; they acknowledged the corn, owned up that they had very little knowledge of the sea, and at the present time, never wanted to know any more about it.

Like the sea-sick gentleman, renowned in story, for the first fifteen minutes they were afraid that they were going to die and then, after that time, they were afraid that they wouldn't.

Gray enjoyed the fun for quite a little time, for sea-sickness is very funny, except to the victim, who never seems to see the fun of it, and when the afflicted ones made a desperate rush, one after the other to the deck, there to pay the tribute old Neptune demands, Gray laughed until the tears fairly came in his eyes, but while he was in this state of merriment, just as he was preparing to follow the others to the deck and there add to their sufferings by suggesting fat pork and such like remedies, the bare thought of which was quite sufficient to make a sea-sick man feel still worse, the sea king concluded to try his power on the scoffer.

"By Jove! I believe that I am going to be sick, too!" Gray exclaimed, in profound astonishment.

And, just then, the yacht gave two or three peculiar pitches; the suspicion became a certainty, and as Gray's attack had not come on quite so soon as the others the sea god seemed disposed to atone for his tardiness by making it twice as severe.

The Brevoorts, who were not affected, were delighted with the way things were going; everything was favorable for their purpose.

Meanwhile the clouds were gathering thick and heavy, and two or three times slight flashes of lightning had rent them asunder.

Alma had all a woman's terror of the lightning, and old Brevoort, perceiving this, took advantage of her alarm to persuade her to go below.

The old gentleman conducted her down to the cabin, and the aged seaman at the wheel, who by this time was about as well under the influence of liquor as a man could well be and stand up, took advantage of Jason's proximity to growl a word of caution in his ear.

"Young gov'nor, we're goin' to ketch it—mind ye! We're goin' to ketch it, hot and heavy. There's bin many a good ship laid her bones on this hyer Jersey coast, an' I reckon that this hyer Princess ain't none too good for that sort o' thing. We're goin' to ketch it—heavy an' hot. I told the gov'nor so, but it's his boat and 'tain't mine; 'bey orders if you break owners; forty years have I took my trick at the wheel, man an' boy, an' nobody that ever knew me kin say that I didn't live up to that 'ere thing!"

Jason was a pretty keen observer, and being well used to rough, common fellows of this stamp, understood the sailor much better than his father, and so he comprehended the force of the warning.

"The storm, then, is going to be a bad one?" There was no doubt now that there was going to be a storm, and, if the signs in the skies spoke true, a severe one.

"A blow big 'nuff to capsize a man-o'-war!"

"Can't we go about and run from it?"

"Blast my eyes! if ye ain't hit it!" the sailor exclaimed, in wonder. "That 'ere is the only thing we kin do, and then I reckon that we won't be able to get inside the Hook afore the blow is onto us. If the old gov'nor had put about when I first told him it would have been all right and we would have been inside the Horseshoe by this time."

"The Horseshoe?"

"Right inside o' Sandy Hook, you know; a fleet could anchor there."

"Put her about and we'll try our luck."

Gladly the sailor obeyed the order, for, drunk as he was, he fully understood the really great danger that threatened the yacht and all on board.

The Princess, too, seemed to comprehend that peril was near and that haste was necessary, for she sped away before the gale at race-horse speed.

In the meantime the old Owl, in the cabin, ignorant of the fact that a dreadful death in the raging billows of the Jersey coast threatened the entire party, proceeded remorselessly to execute the fiendish purpose which he had in view.

Upon descending into the cabin the animation which had inspired Miss Alma during the trip, and caused her to appear much stronger than she really was, deserted her.

It really seemed as if the descent into the cabin, which the crafty old lawyer had designed as the last place on earth which in life she should occupy, had instilled melancholy into her soul.

Her strength, too, seemed to desert her, and she became quite feeble—so much so that she was obliged to lean heavily upon the arm of the old lawyer, much to his satisfaction, for it paved the way to the execution of his scheme.

"You are quite faint," he said, after assisting her to an easy-chair; "allow me to make you a wine lemonade; I feel sure that it will do you good."

"If you will be so kind," she replied.

The girl was strangely affected; she felt weak and helpless.

The shadow of her doom seemed to have fallen upon her.

With a firm hand and a nerve that shrunk not the old lawyer prepared the mixture which was to smooth the way for death.

And the girl drank it, totally unsuspecting. If it had been the most deadly poison that this world has ever known, she would have taken it all the same, for she had perfect faith in the old man of the law.

The drug took effect at once, and the girl soon sunk into a stupor which seemed like death.

Jason entered the cabin at this moment.

"Quick! Prepare to start the fire!" the old Owl exclaimed. "I will go on deck and announce her death."

The scheme was immediately carried out.

With a doleful cry old Brevoort exclaimed that Miss Alma had suddenly expired in his arms.

Despite the sickness which affected all of them, a cry of horror arose.

And then came Jason on deck with the startling news that the yacht was on fire.

"To the boat!" was the cry, and all rushed toward it but Gray, who exclaimed, loudly:

"For Heaven's sake! save the body of the poor girl!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE MERCY OF THE WAVES.

GRAY might as well have appealed to the howling wind now whistling furiously through the cordage of the vessel as to address the panic-stricken passengers of the yacht.

They were all collected at the stern of the vessel, where Jason with a steady hand was pulling in the boat which, attached to the stern of the yacht, floated behind.

The smoke commenced to pour out of the cabin, thus plainly showing that the vessel was indeed on fire.

"For Heaven's sake, men," Gray cried, in appealing tones, "do not leave the body of the poor girl to be burnt up! We can easily take it ashore in the boat with us and give it a decent burial!"

But the rest, wild with fear, heeded not the appeal. They only thought of saving their own precious lives.

Jason hauled the boat up alongside, and the moment he did so and its bow bumped against the stern of the yacht the fear-stricken men would at once have tumbled into it, pell-mell, but Jason, who, as well as his father, preserved his coolness—hearts and heads of iron had these Owls—whipped out a revolver and forced the others back.

"Are you mad?" he cried; "do you want to swamp the boat, our only hope of escape, and consign all of us to a watery grave? Stand back! The first man that moves, except at my bidding, I'll put a bullet through!"

It was quite evident that Jason meant what he said, and even in their wild fear the rest recognized the fact.

"You will descend into the boat one by one as I call out your names; there are oars in the bottom of the boat"—the crafty plotters had not neglected a single thing necessary to the successful carrying out of their scheme—"and there is not the slightest doubt that we can easily make the shore. Descend carefully, and don't upset the boat, and, skipper, you head the yacht in toward the beach."

"Ay, ay!" growled the old sea-dog, who stuck like wax to the helm; "that's w'at I've bin a-doin' of, young gov'nor!"

"Now, father, you first!"

The old Owl descended nimbly into the boat, which Jason's strong arm held under the counter.

"Now, Jerry!"

Although almost helpless through fear and seasickness the boy dropped into the boat.

The negro's name was called next, much to the disgust of the Irishman, who, in spite of the immediate danger that threatened, had spirit enough of race to declare:

"An Irishman's better than a nager, any day in the week!"

But the threatening revolver in Jason's gripe checked further remonstrance.

After the Irishman descended into the boat Jason called to the seaman.

"Arter you, young gov'nor, if you please," that worthy responded. "I kin cast off better nor you can, and, being a seaman born and bred, I ought to be the last to leave the ship!"

Jason saw the force of the remark and descended at once into the boat.

All this, while occupying some time in the result, really took but a very few minutes in the doing.

Gray, like a man dazed by a heavy blow, stood holding onto the rigging, as though unable to believe that the rest would abandon the body of the girl, but when the old sailor left the helm and prepared to cast off the "painter" of the boat, he saw that they had not the slightest idea of attempting to save the body from the devouring flames which were growing stronger and stronger every moment.

In despair the young clerk rushed to the stern and tried one last appeal:

"Jason, if you are a man, don't leave that body!"

"Oh, come on and stop your foolishness!" the other replied, roughly.

"Not without the body!"

"Then stay and be burnt up with it and be hanged to you! Cast off!"

"You're a blarsted fool!" the old sailor cried, to Gray, as he cast off the line, and at the same moment jumped nimbly into the boat.

And then, as though relieved of a heavy burden, the yacht scudded away, for the seaman, with sailor-like precaution, although it is doubtful if he could have given a reason for it, had lashed the tiller upon quitting it, and of course the craft ran like a grayhound before the wind, just the same as though she had not been abandoned to the cruel mercies of the flames and the waves.

There was no time to be lost; the fire was beginning to eat its way through the deck forward, and Gray understood that as soon as the wind could aid the fire, the yacht would be one single sheet of flame.

Whatever was to be done must be done quickly. The water-cask was just forward of the cabin hatch. It was empty, for the old sailor had neglected to fill it.

Gray rushed to it and drove the bung in tightly, thus making a "life-preserver" out of it. A little coil of rope lay on the cabin hatch; this also he secured, and then, through the blinding smoke, he groped his way into the cabin after the girl. He found the body without trouble, and then stumbling against the table, an idea occurred to him to utilize it as a sort of life-raft.

So carrying the body to the deck, he returned and got the table.

He lashed the water-cask and the table together, and then suddenly remembered that he had seen some cork life-preservers under the cabin stairs. To procure two of these, and fasten one around his own body, and the other around the slender form of the girl, just under the arms, was but the work of a moment.

Then committing his novel life-raft to the water from the stern of the yacht, still retaining control of it, by means of the line, he seized the girl in his arms and fearlessly plunged into the angry waves.

He gained the raft without difficulty, while the doomed Princess rushed on madly to its fiery fate.

Soon the flames broke out, ran up the rigging, wrapped themselves around the mast, and, like angry demons, fought with one another for the prey.

Floating in the water, sustained by the life-preserver, also by a lashing to the raft, the girl, too, lashed to him, she supported by the cork belt, and her head drooping helplessly on his shoulder, Gray watched the destruction of the yacht; saw the flames devour the pretty craft until, at last, burned to the water's edge, the fiery demons reluctantly gave up their prey and disappeared, leaving naught but a blackened hulk for the storm to wreak its fury upon.

The Owls in their boat, pulling straight for the shore, also saw the end of the Princess, and they chuckled gleefully at the success of their plans, reckless that to gain their ends they had willfully sacrificed a human life.

Little thought they that Gray, at the peril of his own life, had rescued the girl.

Two chances to escape a watery death the twain had. First, if the tide set toward the shore, they might be washed upon the beach, and as the New Jersey coast is well patrolled by the men of the United States Life Service, who must surely have witnessed the destruction of the yacht, and would therefore be on the lookout for the people escaping from the burning vessel, the probability of a successful landing was great. But if, on the contrary, the tide was on the ebb instead of the flood and set seaward, as they would be carried right in the track of all vessels bound either in or out of the harbor, it was pretty certain that they would be rescued by some passing craft.

Of course Gray never suspected for an instant that the girl was not dead. He had only attempted to save the body because he could not bear the thought that it should be devoured by the flames.

Great, then, was his astonishment when a low sigh escaped from the girl's lips, and he discovered that she was alive.

Soon she recovered her senses. The shock of the plunge into the water had overcome the effects of the powerful drug which had been administered.

And there in the darkness—in the very jaws of death, with the storm playing in savage fury around them, she listened to Gray's story of the terrible plot that the Brevoorts, father and son, had formed against her, for it was all plain to Gilbert Gray, now, with his knowledge of the Owls' secrets.

He knew of the heavy life insurance that old Brevoort had placed upon the girl, but he had thought nothing of it, except that the old lawyer did not believe that she would live and was betting heavily upon her death.

But now his eyes were opened and he knew

the truth. The excursion by night down the harbor, the wine-lemonade administered by old Brevoort to the girl, the fire, evidently not the work of accident but design; it was all clear now; the Owls had coolly and deliberately planned the death of the girl in order to secure the life insurance money.

Gray told the truth to the girl without hesitation. If she died, it mattered not, but if she escaped, why then it was well that she should know exactly what sort of men the Brevoorts, father and son, were.

The clerk had hardly finished his recital when a vivid flash of lightning lit up the stormy sky and revealed a large ship bearing right down upon them.

Gray shouted at the top of his lungs, but a human voice was of but little avail in such a storm.

The ship swept by the pair without any notice of them being taken by the watch on board, but, by a fortunate accident, a rope was trailing over the ship's counter. It passed over Gray's shoulder and he at once comprehending what it was, grasped it with the desperation of despair.

With a single rude shock he was torn from the girl's side, the lashings parted, the girl and life-raft vanished in the distance. He could do naught but hold on, now; he was saved, but the orphan heiress—what fate awaited her?

CHAPTER IX.

A SURPRISING DISCOVERY.

FULL of danger indeed was the situation in which the infernally acute scheme of the two lawyers had placed Gray and the girl, but the position of the Owls was not a great deal better.

The old Owl had counted carefully upon almost every possible chance, but he had not counted upon encountering such a fearful storm as the one which now encompassed them.

If Brevoort had expected such a thing he would have provided a much larger and better boat to escape in.

But the boat was well enough, despite the old man's fears, if the passengers in it would only keep quiet, for the old salt pulled one oar and Jason Brevoort another, and both were skillful oarsmen, but the boy, the negro and the Irishman were wild with terror.

After parting from the yacht, before they could get under way, the boat had swung round in the trough of the waves, and a huge billow, leaping over the gunwale, had drenched them all to the skin.

The Irishman, frightened out of his wits, and believing that his last minute on earth had come, would have at once leaped out of the boat into the sea, had not the negro, who was almost helpless through fear, clung to him like a leech.

"I've go of me!" the Irishman shouted. "It's a dead man I am, shure! I'm kilt entirely! Oh, why did I iver lave the land?"

"Keep still, you fool!" yelled Jason, through the howling of the storm. "Lay down in the bottom of the boat or I'll put a bullet through your crazy skull. Lie down all of you!"

Despite their fears they crouched down all in a heap, the three of them, in the bottom of the boat, for they knew that Jason would be as good as his word.

But every time a wave broke over the boat and the salt spray reached them, a most dismal chorus of howls arose.

There wasn't one of them but had enough of the sea to last him for all the rest of his life.

"Can you make out where we are?" Jason asked of the old seaman, as they tugged at the oars.

"Ay, ay, sir," responded that worthy, for the excitement and the peril had most completely sobered him. "We're about off Seabright. I saw the Highland lights clear and good, right ahead of us, jest afore we left the vessel."

"We should be further up then."

"Oh, no; it's a strong tide and a-settin' down the coast."

"About how far are we from the land?"

"Not over a mile I reckon."

"We ought to be able to make it then."

"Oh, we'll make it, fast 'nuff; the only thing that troubles me, young gov'nor, is the way we'll make it. This here cockle-shell will never live in the breakers when we gits in near shore."

"It will be dangerous landing then!"

"Young gov'nor, I reckon that we'll have to swim for it, and for them as can't swim, may the Lord have mercy on their souls."

This was a dismal prospect truly, and Jason set his teeth together tightly as he contemplated the peril before them all.

Of what avail would be the death of the girl, if they, who were to profit by it, should never live to reach the shore?

They had committed a useless crime.

"Can you swim, dad?" he asked of the old man, who, like a huge frog, was squatting down in the bow of the boat.

"Not a stroke—why do you ask?"

"Because our worthy sea-dog here says that we will surely upset as soon as we get near the shore and get in among the breakers, and that those who can't swim will stand a mighty poor chance to be saved."

"umph!" grunted the old man, in a manner

that plainly showed that he was not a bit frightened.

"We've had our labors for our pains, dad, if we all find a watery grave on this infernal coast!"

"How is your revolver—is it wet? Will it go off?"

The question puzzled Jason; what on earth did the old man want of the revolver? He surely was not contemplating taking his own life as a means of escaping death by drowning.

"It's all right; I've got it in an inside pocket; what do you want with it?"

"Give it to me."

Jason complied with the request.

"This coast is carefully patrolled by the life-service men; tell the sailor to warn me when we near the coast, and I will fire some shots and the flash of the revolver's fire will be apt to attract their attention, and if they will put off in one of their surf-boats we shall escape. I have no idea of dying just now, Jason; I want to finger that life insurance money first. I've been to a great deal of trouble to secure it, and I don't intend to be cheated out of it just by a beggarly storm."

There was no mistaking the fact that the old Owl was a plucky man—game to the backbone, as the saying is.

There was very little more conversation until a very vivid flash of lightning lit up the wild waste of waters and revealed to the anxious eyes of the old lawyer that they were within a short quarter of a mile of the shore, and on the white sandy beach, just beyond the foaming breakers, he could plainly distinguish a group of men engaged, apparently, in launching a surf-boat.

The burning of the yacht had attracted their attention, and anticipating that the passengers on board would take to their boats and attempt to make a landing, they were preparing to assist them.

Taking advantage of a temporary lull in the storm the old lawyer discharged the revolver.

But this was useless, for the same flash of lightning that had showed to Brevoort the men upon the shore had also revealed to them the proximity of the boat and the necessity that existed for aid.

They launched the boat at once, and, propelled by the life-guards' strong arms—guided too with the skill that long years of experience had given to these hardy surf-men, the life-boat came safely through the breakers.

The next flash of lightning that came revealed to Brevoort that the boat had passed safely through the foaming surf and that within a few minutes it would be alongside.

By this time the storm had spent its fury and the wind had calmed down so that conversation was possible in the boat without causing the speakers to yell at the top of their lungs.

"The surf-boat is near at hand!" Brevoort exclaimed. "In ten minutes we will be on board of her!"

"A boat! Oh, mother of Moses!" yelled the Irishman, jumping to his feet, a proceeding which naturally endangered the safety of the boat, for in such a sea as was running even the safest of crafts is apt to be a little cranky.

"Sit down, you fool!" shouted the old seaman, in a rage; "do you want to have us over?"

"But the boat—where the devil is the boat?" persisted the doctor, taking no notice of the command.

"Sit down, you bog-trotting fool! or I'll unship my oar and crack your crazy skull with it!"

The threat quieted the Irishman, and he crouched down again in the bottom of the craft, and contented himself with muttering to his companions that when he once got safe on shore he'd "bate that devil of a sailor-man black and blue for his impudence!"

The prospect of an escape from the peril that threatened at once raised the mercurial spirits of the doctor.

The fury of the storm having sensibly abated all within the boat became more cheerful. Death's cold hand had come so near that they had felt the chill of its presence, but what was that, if the cold king of terrors did not grip them fairly?

The surf-boat came alongside and after a great deal of trouble, caused by the restlessness and idiotic behavior of the doctor, succeeded in taking on board all the inmates of the boat.

"You had a narrow escape, I tell you!" exclaimed the leader of the rescuing-party, an old, gray-headed surf-man who could boast of fifty years' experience along the coast. "That little egg-shell of yours would have been swamped at the first breaker, and on such a night as this it would bother the strongest swimmer to make the land, for, with such a tide as is on to-night, that's a terrible undertow and it will sweep a man clean out to sea afore he knows what he is."

The three minor members of the party shivered, and even the cast-iron old salt felt a little thrill creep over him as they reflected upon the danger that was passed, but the two lawyers never heeded it in the least. Their thoughts were elsewhere. They ready

how to prepare so strong a case in regard to the death of the heiress that the insurance men would pay the money without question.

The shore was reached and all the party landed safely; they found shelter for the night at Seabright and on the next morning departed for New York.

And there a great surprise awaited them—an important disclosure that materially affected the orphan heiress.

Her uncle, Richard Van Dyke, her father's only brother, had just died in the Black Hills, where he was engaged in mining speculations, and to his niece he had left his entire fortune, cash, stocks, mining property, altogether estimated to be worth about five hundred thousand dollars.

Here was a windfall, indeed, and the two lawyers looked at each other. Alma living now was worth a good deal more than Alma dead.

"Ah, well," remarked old Brevoort, in a matter-of-fact way, "we must bring the rich young woman back to life again."

CHAPTER X.

THE UNKNOWN SIREN.

Now then our story leaps forward a whole year; that period of time we cover with a single bound, for such is the privilege of the romancer.

And now it is of Saratoga we write, gayest of all our nation's summer resorts.

The season was at its hight; the fashionable lounging-place had never been more crowded—the hotels and boarding-houses more liberally patronized.

The correspondents of the metropolitan papers devoted much space to the gayeties of this popular resort, and gave long lists of the prominent men and women who honored the place with their presence, and of all the famous men, all the distinguished women, none received more conspicuous notice than the well-known New York lawyers who composed the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort, and their fair ward, Alma Van Dyke, the girl who was worth in her own right two millions of dollars, for such was the sum that common report assigned to the heiress.

Little wonder that the industrious reporters gave particular prominence to the dresses, jewelry and conduct of the enormously wealthy heiress, or devoted considerable space to the Brevoorts, father and son, who had the management of this great estate.

For the Brevoorts had thrived—the Owls had prospered, thanks to the second great windfall that a kind fortune had thrust in their way.

As the old Owl had said, he felt sure that the tide would soon turn; luck could not always be bad. Fortune was a fickle jade, and she was just as ready to smile after she had administered a knock-down blow as any other time.

And the tide did turn. The terrible crime which old Brevoort had planned and so deliberately executed seemed to turn the current of luck in his favor, although, as events proved, it was a useless deed.

Thanks to the ready cash left by old Dick Van Dyke, the veteran miner, and which Brevoort at once got his fingers upon, he was able to take up his forged paper, and when that was once destroyed he could laugh to scorn the thoughts of Sing Sing's prison doors; and, as the old lawyer had predicted all along, a flood-tide of prosperity set in that seemed likely to make the United States wealthy beyond comparison.

It is generally pretty easy for a man to make money in this world if he has plenty of money to back him, and so the old Owl, who had been so near the verge of ruin, now, thanks to the new fortune of the heiress, entered upon a fresh career of prosperity.

The wealthy heiress had created quite a sensation at Saratoga. Girls worth in their own right two millions of dollars as Alma was given out to be, are not plentiful either in the old world or new, and so for a time the young heiress was the social lion of the hour.

Nothing was talked of but her diamonds—her beautiful dresses, the exquisite taste of her fancy turnout, two coal-black Shetlands, hardly bigger than good-sized goats, attached to a most elegant little carriage.

It must be confessed that the Owls did the handsome thing for the heiress, although of course her money paid for it all.

The heiress and her guardians had been in Saratoga just six weeks when we again take up the thread of our story. She had arrived at the beginning of the season, had selected the handsomest apartments that the famous Grand Union Hotel could boast, and arranged to occupy them while the season lasted.

As we have said, Alma created a decided sensation—extremely pretty, dressing like a princess, full of life and vivacity, although sapient critics, envious perhaps of her great advantages, said, with a sneer, that it was a pity that some brains hadn't been bequeathed to her along with the money, yet the world at large worshiped gladly at the feet of the idol, quite content so long as the outside was gold, and never troubling themselves about the inside of the god.

One of those beautiful summer nights, for which our American climate is renowned, had come, although the day had been terribly hot, but with the coming on of the darkness a pleasant breeze had sprung up so that the exertion of dancing in the ball-room was not unpleasant and was most largely indulged in.

A dance had just finished, and a great many of the pleasure-seekers had strolled out into the garden to cool off, when the old Owl, clad in full evening dress, with expensive diamonds in his shirt-front, a flower on the lapel of his coat and a white necktie, that gave him such a ministerial appearance, that no one in this world would be apt to believe him the rascal that he was, sauntered into the garden from the hotel, evidently looking for some one.

That "some one" he soon found; Jason, who had been one of the gayest of the ball-room throng, had tired of the dance and had sought the garden to cool off and enjoy a cigar.

Comfortably seated in a rustic garden-chair, with his head thrown back, puffing away at a "weed," that represented half a day's work of an honest laboring man, was the young Owl.

Brevoort soon espied the well-known figure and sauntering up to where he was seated, helped himself to another chair near to the one in which his son was seated.

"I thought that I recognized your figure, Jason; been enjoying yourself in the ball-room?" the old Owl said.

"Yes, I've been having a most delightful time."

"If I mistake not, I saw you dancing with Miss Romola."

"Your eyes did not deceive you, dad, I have been dancing with the lady." There was a sort of dry expression in the voice of the young man which seemed to indicate that he did not relish the subject.

The old man noticed it, for he was wonderfully acute about this sort of thing, but it was exactly what he was determined to speak about and so he went on heedless of the warning that, to him, was plainly apparent in the voice.

"She's a rather pretty girl this Miss Romola—who is she?" he asked, slowly.

"Miss Lucia Romola, to give her her full name," replied Jason, in measured accents, "is a young lady who possesses a voice like a bird. She is an Australian by birth, and thanks to the wonderful gift that nature has bestowed upon her, has succeeded in making a most electric success as a vocalist in the concert-room, and there isn't the slightest doubt that if she went to Italy and placed herself under the care of a competent master she would make one of the greatest opera singers that the world has ever known."

"And that is all that you know about her?" the old man asked, dryly.

"Yes, dad, that is all that I know about her, and I trust you will excuse me if I remark that it is all that I want to know about her."

"Jason, my boy, will you listen to me when I tell you that that woman is an adventuress, and one of the most dangerous kind?" exclaimed old Brevoort, impressively.

"Why, dad, what is the use of asking such a question as that? You know, or ought to know, that I am perfectly willing to listen to anything that you may care to say!" Jason was smiling as he spoke, but there was open defiance both in his face and voice.

"This girl—this adventuress—has bewitched you!" the old lawyer exclaimed, testily.

"Well, I guess I will have to plead guilty to that."

"And what good can come of it?"

"That remains to be seen!" replied the son, coolly.

"I tell you that she is a most dangerous woman, slight, fragile girl though she seems. I am sure of it, my instincts warn me against her, and in such matters I am never wrong."

"Dad!" cried the son, impatiently, "will you excuse me if I remark that you are getting childish over this matter? You must remember that I have instincts as well as you, and can generally smell danger just as far."

"But you are infatuated."

"Most men generally are when there's a woman in the case."

"You surely haven't any serious ideas of marrying this girl?"

"By Jove! I have, if she will have me, upon which subject I am somewhat in doubt."

"But you are really throwing yourself away upon this unknown adventuress!" the old man persisted. "Here is the heiress all ready for you. I know that she expects you will make love to her; she'd just jump at you, if you would only give her the chance."

"My dear dad, I wouldn't for the world put the young lady to that trouble. She can jump at some one else if she likes but not at me."

"I tell you that this woman is dangerous!" old Brevoort persisted. "Don't you notice in her a wonderful likeness to some one that you have seen before?"

"Yes, her face is familiar."

"And don't you know whom she resembles?"

"Indeed I don't!"

"Why, Jason, you must be blind!" the old man exclaimed, in astonishment. "I noticed it the very moment I set my eyes upon her face,

and I have been puzzling my brains over it ever since."

"Well, governor, I will own up that you are smarter than I am, for although her face seems very familiar to me, yet I am not able to say where I ever saw one like it."

"Carry your mind back to the night when the Princess sunk off the Jersey coast!" exclaimed the old Owl, cautiously; "think of the face of our victim, as she sunk into the stupor which was the prelude to her death—is not this girl the living image of the girl we doomed, Alma Van Dyke?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAN FROM NEW YORK.

JASON pulled at the ends of his long mustache for a moment before he answered. The recollection of the stormy night when the fire-fiends sported with the pretty yacht was not pleasant. A peculiarity about the Owls was that they seldom recalled past events wherein they had played prominent parts, if those parts were of a rascally nature.

To let the dead past be dead was one of their mottoes.

Jason was somewhat astonished, too; now that his father had spoken, he saw plainly enough that there was a great resemblance between this Lucia Romola and the girl whom they had so coolly doomed to so terrible a fate, and he wondered where his wits had been at he had not noticed it before. Not that he attached the slightest importance to it, for he did not. What did it matter if this girl did resemble the other? Miss Romola, the daughter of the far-off Australian land, could have no connection whatever with the ill-fated child of the late Martin Van Dyke. And that the old man should be disturbed by the evidently accidental resemblance was only a proof to Jason that the mind of his father was not as strong as it once was; it was plain that the stern, crafty, iron-willed old Owl was not the man that he used to be, and Jason mentally smiled when he reflected how far superior he was to all such weakness.

"Yes," he remarked at last, "now that you come to speak of it I see that there is a very strong likeness, but I don't think that I should have ever noticed it, if you had not spoken of it."

"Oh, my dear boy, I saw the likener the very first time that I encountered her. Coming round an angle in the entry one day, I came suddenly face to face with her, and, Jason, my boy, you could have knocked me down with a feather, so thoroughly was I surprised!" the old Owl exclaimed, nervously. "For a moment I believed that it was the dead, bodily risen from the grave—Alma Van Dyke in person, come to call us to an account for our crime."

"Crime is a hard word, dad," Jason observed, carelessly, and with warning in his voice.

"Oh, well, we don't need to beat about the bush when we are alone together," the old man replied. "It was a crime, of course, skillfully planned and as skillfully executed, although, as after events proved, we might have saved ourselves the trouble and been just as well off."

"No, dad, you are wrong there; not just as well, for that girl, weak, sickly creature though she was, had a will and a resolution wonderful in a woman—that is, if I am any judge of character."

"Perhaps, perhaps; but that is all over now, but, in regard to this girl, if you will take my advice you will not have anything to do with her. I tell you she is a dangerous woman."

"Dad, don't you know me well enough to understand that even if I believed you were correct in this matter—which I doubt—it would not turn me a single jot from my purpose?" Jason replied, firmly. "I am infatuated with the girl and I am determined to win her if I can."

"She will prove your ruin, Jason!" the old man cried. "I feel the spirit of prophecy strong upon me. I know that this girl is dangerous—far more dangerous than any woman that you ever encountered in your life."

Jason smiled contemptuously.

"Oh, you may smile," the old man said, earnestly, "but you will see that I am right about this matter. You never made anything yet, since you were a little boy, by going against my will. The time you absconded with the ten thousand dollars, I let you go and never said a word about it—"

"You didn't dare to!" retorted the son, scornfully. "You knew that I was too well acquainted with the private affairs of the law firm of Brevoort and Brevoort. I could, and would, have made some spicy revelations if you had attempted to lay me by the heels. Father, you never treated me fairly. I always did the work and you took the profits, and I thought that for once in my life I would see a fair division of the spoils, and so I 'levanted' with all I could get my hands on."

"And what good did it do you?" asked the old man, bitterly. "It led you to the rope's end, and if it hadn't been for my careful thought you would be occupying an unknown grave like a pauper."

"You sent for me because you wanted me!" Jason exclaimed, contemptuously. "You missed your tool who took all the bold work upon his shoulders and never grumbled at the risk, no matter how great; but, dad, there isn't really any need for us to quarrel about this matter. It is my business and doesn't concern you at all. If I choose to make a fool of myself, with the girl, why, that is my affair and not yours. I am bewitched and I'm determined to have her."

"But, Jason, my boy, it is such utter folly, if you will pardon the expression!" the old man exclaimed. "Here you have a fortune in your grasp if you only choose to say the word and take it."

"You refer to Miss Alma Van Dyke, the substitute?"

"Yes."

"The girl is a fool."

"What difference does that make? She has a superb fortune. I'm not advising you to marry the girl for either her wit or her beauty—although she is a very beautiful girl, and strikingly like the other one, and like this Miss Romola, too—but for her money. She's got the 'stamps,' my boy, and money makes the mare go, you know."

"I never yet set money against my passions," Jason answered, contemptuously, "and I don't intend to do so now. This girl, to use the old Western saying, dad, has taken me for all that I'm worth, and I'm determined to have her, no matter how great the cost. She's a proud little thing, and I've got to marry her to get her. To hear her talk one would think that she had always been used to wealth and luxury. She carries it pretty well for a girl who has probably seen some pretty hard times before she made a success as a vocalist."

"But, Jason, who is she? Has she got any friends or family?"

"Not a soul in the world, so she says, and I fancy from the way in which she speaks that she has had a pretty hard time with some of her family or friends, for of course I presume that she has got some somewhere, although she says not."

"Lucia Romola is of course an assumed name."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly, although when I have questioned her jokingly upon the subject, she has always said that it was the only name that she has, and that if she ever had any other it is now lost past all redemption."

"Well, you are your own master, Jason," observed Brevoort, rising, as if wearied of the interview, "and if you choose to go after the girl of course it is your own affair, but if evil comes of it, remember that I did not fail to warn you."

"Oh, you shall have due credit, dad," Jason answered, lightly; "but I say, governor, you don't give me much credit when you think that this one little weak woman is going to bring me to destruction."

"My dear boy, if you will look back over the history of the world, to say nothing of Mother Eve, you will see that a single weak woman has often not only ruined one foolish man, but often has been the means of upsetting a whole government and so changing the destinies of a nation."

And with this wise remark, whose truth it is not in the power of man to gainsay, the old Owl sauntered off.

Jason gazed after him in undisguised contempt.

"Dad is getting into his dotage!" he exclaimed, sneeringly. "What utter nonsense to speak about the spirit of prophecy! It's true that there is something peculiar about the girl, and it attracted me to her the moment I saw her, although she is not at all an adept in the coquette's arts. I was attracted and dad was repelled; the influence, whatever it is, worked exactly opposite in our cases. But I'm going to have her; I've made up my mind to that!"

Jason rose as he finished the speech and walked toward the ball-room. Again was he about to place himself under the spell of Miss Romola's beauty. But he had hardly got a dozen steps on his way when his attention was attracted by two men who stood right in the path before him, engaged in a violent dispute.

One of the men was the negro steward of the hotel who generally acted as a sort of major-domo over the grounds attached to the Grand Union—a solemn-looking darkey, really ridiculous from the dignified airs that he assumed and which he considered necessary to his position.

The other was a tall, well-built fellow, with a strongly marked face, long black hair that floated down over his shoulders, after the scout fashion, introduced by Buffalo Bill and others of his class, and a general "Western" appearance.

The steward had espied the stranger promenading in the most careless fashion around the garden and had at once taken upon himself the task of informing the stranger that his room was better than his company. And he set about performing this extremely delicate service in a manner that he considered to be the height of courtesy.

He approached the man as he stopped for a moment to admire a couple of elegantly-dressed ladies that passed by, and touched him on the arm.

"If you hab de kindness, sah, to step dis way for a moment, sah," and he drew the man from the open square into the less public path.

"You wl hab to excuse me, sah, dat I am under de unpleasant necessity ob reminding you, sah, dat dis yere style of dress is not de thing for de gardins ob de Grand Union."

The man surveyed his attire in amazement.

In truth his dress was rather peculiar. He wore a slate-colored coat with big wide sleeves, the paletot of twenty years ago; no vest—only a frilled and ruffled shirt with a big Byronic collar; a loose black silk necktie knotted carelessly around his throat; black velvet pantaloons, made tight around the hips after the Mexican fashion, and a broad-brimmed white slouch hat.

It was an extremely picturesque-looking costume, but, as the negro steward had justly observed, hardly the thing for the gardens of the Grand Union Hotel.

CHAPTER XII.

THE YOUNG OWL IS ASTONISHED.

"No, sah, it is not de thing," the steward continued. "I am sorry, sah, to be under de disagreeable circumspection of bein' obliged, sah, to call your mind to dis yere fact, but it won't do, sah."

"The blazes it won't!" cried the stranger, in such a vigorous tone that the darky, taken by surprise, started in alarm. "What do you know about it, anyway? I'll have you to understand that I'm The Man from New York, lately sojourning in the West, and this style of costume is reckoned to be jest the top of the heap there."

"Can't help dat, sah!" replied the steward, extremely dignified and overwhelmingly polite; "it is not de top of de heap at de Grand Union. It don't suit our style here, sah."

"And who in thunder cares whether it does or not, and what is it your business, anyway?" and the man advanced in such a threatening manner that the negro retreated in apprehension.

"If you don't leave de gardin, sah, I shall call for de police!"

"Call and be darned! I reckon that I've paid my money in advance for a week's board at this shebang, and no tan-colored American citizen of African descent is gwine to b'ist me out if I know myself and the court thinks that she does!"

"W'at's dat, sah?" exclaimed the steward, pricking up his ears in astonishment. "Habe you paid a week's board, sah? Are you a guest of dis hotel, sah?"

The darky was decidedly astonished; he had never encountered any such man as the stranger before, and on account of his peculiar dress had at once set him down as a tramp, although the man was handsome and dashy-looking, and, barring his odd dress, appeared every inch a gentleman.

"You can bet your last dime on that, my colored brother!"

And then a sudden light broke in upon the steward; he had heard of poets and their eccentric ways, although he had never happened to encounter one, and he instantly jumped to the conclusion that he had got hold of one of those children of genius; so he hastened to apologize.

"It is a mistake, sah, an' I'm berry sorry, sah, dat de circumstance should hab de unpleasantness of happening. You will excuse me, sah, please."

And the negro bowed himself away, thus allowing the stranger to come face to face with Jason Brevoort.

The recognition was mutual.

"The young Owl, by thunder!" the man exclaimed.

"Gilbert Gray!" came from the lips of Brevoort.

For the moment he could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. Never had a thought that Gray might have escaped the perils of that dreadful night upon the ocean entered Jason's mind. He as fully believed that Gray was dead and buried in the depths of the ocean, a prey to the marine monsters of the deep, as he did that he himself had escaped in safety from the burning yacht.

But now, lo and behold! The Man from New York, as he usually termed himself, sprung again into the path, and the "thoroughbred" had prospered, too, apparently.

Jason was disgusted! There was not a creature in the world that he hated, and feared, as he did Gilbert Gray.

"Well, Jason, old boy, how are you?" was Gray's familiar exclamation.

The first moment of surprise over the natural coolness of the young Owl returned.

"Hallo! is that you, Gray?" he replied. "I thought you were dead long ago."

"Oh, no; a cat has nine lives, you know, and there's a good deal of the cat about me in that respect."

"How did you escape?" Jason was anxious about this matter.

"Oh, luck stood my friend, but if you want to hear the whole of my amusing and instructive adventures, you had better sit down for it will take some time."

There were a couple of garden-chairs near at hand; Gray helped himself to one while Jason took the other. The Owl pulled out his cigar-case and offered one of the fragrant weeds to the other, which Gray accepted, lit one himself and settled down, comfortably, to listen.

Jason as yet was uncertain whether Gray was going to turn into a friend or an enemy, and therefore he had resolved to treat him with all civility until he should develop his purpose in coming to Saratoga, for that Gray had a purpose in coming the young lawyer was quite certain.

"Well, to commence right at the beginning: you remember when the fire broke out I was pretty well under the influence of champagne, which at your noble and generous father's invitation I had imbibed altogether too freely. Under the influence of the wine I determined to save the body of the girl from the devouring flames, although if I had been sober I suppose I would have been as eager to run for the boat to save my own precious carcass as any of the rest. You wouldn't listen to my supplications to save the body and pushed off, leaving me on the burning boat."

"If you were disposed to play the fool and risk your life for a whim it was no reason that the rest of us should do so," Jason remarked, in his dry way.

"Oh, no, of course not; I'm not blaming you in the least. If I had not been under the influence of the wine I should probably have been as great a coward and as careful of my own precious person as any man in the gang."

Jason made a grimace but said nothing.

"When I realized that you were fairly gone and that I was left to the mercy of the flames and the angry waves, it seemed to sober me right up. I made a raft of the cabin table and the water cask, found two life-preservers in the cabin when I went down after the body of the girl, and fastening one on her and the other on myself, launched my raft, and with the body in my arms committed myself to the mercy of the deep. After I got into the water I made a wonderful discovery; the girl was not dead, only in a swoon, and she soon recovered her senses, but of course you know that now. Well, after floating in the water for quite a time, uncertain whether we were being carried in toward the shore or floating out to sea, a big vessel came by us; I yelled at the top of my voice, but the storm drowned my cries and they were unheard on board the ship, but just by that dumb luck which has always seemed to follow me all through my life, a rope had been carelessly left trailing in the water; the sailors on nearly all outbound ships are pretty well under the influence of liquor for the first six or eight hours of the voyage and don't attend to their duties as carefully as they should. The rope trailed right across my face; I seized it and clung as the drowning man is said to cling to a straw. The shock tore me away from my raft though and from the girl, and I then vanished in the darkness. I pulled myself up on the rope hand over hand until I reached the ship, and then I managed to clamber on board.

"The vessel was bound for California by the way of Cape Horn. I told the captain my story and he received me in the kindest manner, like the perfect brick that he was. He provided me with dry clothes and said that he would speak the first vessel that we met and put me on board so that I could return to New York, and, would you believe it, Jason, nary a vessel bound for New York or any United States port did we meet until after we had doubled the cape, and then as I had come so far the captain suggested that I might as well go on and try my luck in California. He had taken a fancy to me and offered to lend me a 'stake' to make a fresh start in life, besides charging me nothing for my passage.

"And so I went to California, and, Jason, it was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. I thought that it was a terrible stroke of fortune, but in the end it turned out splendidly. California was just the country for me. I went in and speculated like a louse afre; I made a strike—a good big strike right off. I paid the captain back his money and then started off for the Black Hills country, for everybody said that was the place for a lively man; and everybody was right—it is! I made my head-quarters at Deadwood and prospered exceedingly. In fact, Jason, I had no wish—no idea of returning to the East until I happened to read in one of the New York papers an account of the arrival at Saratoga, for the summer, of the wealthy heiress, Miss Alma Van Dyke, accompanied by her guardian, Alexander Brevoort, and that was the first intimation I received that the girl, like myself, had escaped the peril of that fearful night, so I came East at once to get my share out of this precious steal!"

Mr. Gray had developed into an enemy very suddenly.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CHALLENGE TO BATTLE.

The young Owl regarded Gray for a few moments in silence, eying him in a very peculiar manner. It was just as if Jason was endeavoring to make up his mind what course was the best to be pursued.

It was quite plain that Gray had come to Saratoga with the intention of being ugly.

Not very long did young Brevoort take to come to a conclusion, but Gray, coolly leaning back in his chair and puffing at his cigar in perfect good humor with himself and all the world, was not at all in haste, and did not attempt to hurry the lawyer in the least.

If he had put his thoughts into words he would have said:

"You're on the hook; take out all the line you want. I see perfectly certain that you can't escape me, and when I choose to land you, there is no hope for you."

It is possible that Jason guessed the thoughts of the other and hesitated a little, so as to encourage Gray in his belief that he had the Owls in a tight place, when, in reality, they were fully prepared for him.

At last Jason spoke.

"And so, Mr. Gray, if I understand your purpose rightly, you have come all the way from the Black Hills to make a 'stake' out of the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort?" The young Owl spoke in the smoothest and most commonplace manner, just as if it was this sort of thing that was to be expected at any moment.

"Jason, your head always was level!" Gray exclaimed, admiringly. "You are just the kind of man that I like; you look at things in such a plain, business-like way."

Gray was just as smooth and easy as the other, but he was not at all deceived by Jason's manner. He guessed that the Owls intended to fight, and he felt pretty certain from the way in which Jason spoke that he was not at all alarmed in regard to the result.

"Oh, there's nothing like coming to an understanding in regard to these little matters; and, as you appear to like frankness, I trust you will excuse me when I say that it is my firm impression that, in this business, you will have your labor for your pains, and that you had much better have remained where you were in the wilds of the Black Hills."

"And now to be equally frank with you, I will tell you that I think you are extremely wrong in the view you take of the matter," Gray replied, decidedly. "It is very true that you have been wonderfully favored by fortune in this affair, but your good luck can't always last. Your fortune, now, is a bubble which I have come on here to prick."

"Mr. Gray, pray have the kindness to explain exactly what you mean, for I confess I am somewhat in the dark as to what you are driving at."

"State my case, ch?"

"Exactly."

"I will, and I think you will be obliged to admit, after I get through, that it is a pretty strong one."

"Go ahead; I am all attention."

"Well, then, to put the recital in story form: Alma Van Dyke, the daughter and sole heir of the late Martin Van Dyke, inherited a million of dollars, in round figures, from her father. Your firm had the care of the property. Your father speculated heavily in the stock market, and, during the time that intervened between the death of the father and the daughter's arrival from England—where she had been at school—to settle up the estate, he contrived to make away with nearly all of this large fortune. In the stock market the fortunes of war had gone against him; his own resources not only became exhausted, but he had pledged his credit for large amounts. In this dilemma he did not hesitate to use the trust-funds placed in his care, and so he lost Alma Van Dyke's million. The arrival of the girl from abroad put him in a terrible position; and so, to cover up one crime, he determined upon another. The orphan heiress had been in bad health, and your father, perfectly willing to make a 'raise' out of the life insurance companies, had insured her life for a considerable sum. With these policies in force, and the knowledge that the death of Alma Van Dyke would put needed money in his pocket, it was no wonder that a man as desperate and unscrupulous as your father should resolve to aid disease and, at a single blow, end the life of the girl. A trip down the harbor was planned; all the arrangements were carefully and cunningly made. Plenty of wine was provided so that all on board, who would be apt to be used as witnesses, might have their senses so steeped in liquor as to be willing to swear to what your father wanted, and not be in a condition to see the truth of the matter. The plot worked from beginning to end without a hitch, excepting that the elements interfered a little by a storm, that was not down in the programme. The girl was drugged; your father rushed up from the cabin and announced that she was dead, and then, in

order to stop the investigation which, under the circumstances, would naturally be made, the yacht was fired by you, and the fire drove everybody to the small boat, anxious to save their own lives, and entirely neglecting the girl. I alone stuck to the yacht; I plucked the body from the flames, constructed a raft and took to the water; was rescued by a passing ship, but the girl, who recovered her senses while with me in the sea, was torn from me by the wild waves. You and your father, with the rest, reached the shore in safety, but when you arrived at New York, and began to prepare proofs of the girl's death, so as to put in a claim for the insurance money, the news came to you that by the death of Dick Van Dyke, Alma's uncle, a veteran miner, operating on an extensive scale in the Black Hills, the girl had become entitled to a second million. Alma, dead, was worth to you only a few thousand dollars, but Alma, living, was worth a million, and that is where your infernal luck comes in. By some means you managed to get the girl, whom I, at the risk of my life, had saved from the dreadful death to which you two Owls had doomed her, into your clutches again, and so you got hold of the second million, and as times have improved, you, doubtless, backed by this enormous capital, have been able to make good a part, if not all your losses. You have prospered, thanks to me."

"Thanks to you?" interrupted Jason, quickly: "you will excuse me if I am somewhat dull of apprehension, but I do not really see what you had to do with the matter at all."

" Didn't I save the girl from the fiery death to which you had doomed her, owing to the success of the fiendish scheme which you so coolly planned and so deliberately carried out? If the girl had perished in the burning yacht, as you intended she should, how could you possibly have got this second million in your clutches?"

Jason leaned back in his chair and surveyed The Man from New York with a quiet smile, and Gray understood at once that this meant war.

"A very entertaining story; quite romantic, too," he remarked, after quite a pause. "I had no idea, Gray, of your talent for this sort of thing. You ought to turn it to account. A man with such a gift—such a gold mine, ought not to let it go unworked. You ought to write this thing up and send it to some of the newspapers."

"It would read well in print," Gray admitted.

"Yes, undoubtedly; you have contrived to weave the fiction and the truth together in such an ingenious way that it would puzzle a man acquainted with the facts of the case to separate the one from the other."

"No fiction at all to it!"

"Oh, yes, there is—more fiction than fact."

"State a single thing that is not the truth!" exclaimed Gray, defiantly.

"Why, this nonsense about my father and myself being in a plot to wrong the heiress."

"That is the truth and you know it is!"

"Stick to it, Mr. Gray; there is nothing like a man swearing that the lie he utters is truth, even when he knows it is not, provided he is to profit by it. But, to come right down to solid business now, you have come all the way from your wild Western home to make a 'stake' out of the Owls!"

"Yes, exactly; I want my share of the plunder."

"And you propose, if we do not yield to your demand, to make this little story—this interesting romance of yours public?"

"Yes, to a certain extent. I shall interview Miss Alma and recall to her mind certain things which have evidently been allowed to slumber in her recollection."

"You ain't a bit of a hero!" Jason exclaimed, contemptuously. "You ought not to come and try to get me to buy your silence; why, that makes you a party to the wrong! You ought to proclaim yourself the champion of the orphan girl and threaten us with the direst consequences if we do not redress the wrong that we have done."

"That is exactly my little game!" Gray now openly announced. "I don't want the girl's money—not a cent of it; and I intend that you shall make good what you have taken. To tell you the truth, Jason, as I do not think I will weaken my position any by so doing, I am just 'feeling' you to find out what you intend to do in the matter."

"Well, Mr. Gray, we intend to laugh at you and at your ridiculous story; it is all so utterly absurd that it is not worthy of any other treatment."

"Then all that remains for me to do is to see Miss Alma; to say to her: 'The time for patience is past and the hour of vengeance has come; I am your friend; I have money in plenty and I will spend it to help you to fight the Owls and secure the rights that justly belong to you!'"

"Now you are going to play the champion, but we laugh at you all the same!" Jason cried, contemptuously. "See, there is Miss Alma Van Dyke yonder," and he pointed to a lady just

emerging from the ball-room, who, to Gray's eyes, did strikingly resemble the heiress. "I will call her, introduce you to her and give you the chance which you have come all the way from the Black Hills to procure!"

The Owl was showing fight with a vengeance.

CHAPTER XIV.

A BOLD GAME.

DESPITE his skill and shrewdness, Gray was perplexed by this bold movement. His first attack, in this battle royal upon which he had entered, evidently was a failure, and everything had gone entirely different from what he had expected.

In looking over the field and preparing his plan of operations, Gray had counted confidently upon the Owls showing fight—he had expected it—was certain that they would not tamely submit to have their prey wrested from them; it was not in the nature of either father or son to yield without a struggle; but the gentleman from Deadwood, who had come all the way to the Atlantic seaboard with the laudable design of cutting the claws of the Owls, had reasoned that the Prevoorts, in their efforts to parry the blow aimed at them, would do all in their power to prevent him from getting into communication with the orphan girl; he imagined that they would attempt to secrete the heiress, to put her out of his reach, and he had counted upon a good deal of fun in baffling their plans and procuring an interview with the girl in spite of them.

But to be introduced by Jason in person to the girl, and after that acute gentleman was in possession of the knowledge that his sole object in coming East was to induce her to make a bold stand for her rights—what did it mean?

Had the Owls managed to get the girl to completely under their thumb that they felt sure she would not lend herself to any proceedings against them, or—but what else could there be? What other reason, that they so boldly lifted up the gauge of battle that he had thrown down?

Gray was completely puzzled. The Owls knew his game and he had not the slightest idea of theirs.

So far, the advantage rested with them, most decidedly.

But one attack don't make a battle, nor one battle generally decide the fate of a nation, and so Gray possessed his soul with patience and waited for the coming of the girl.

Jason stepped from the shadows into the glare of the lights, and raising his voice, called to the lady:

"Miss Van Dyke!"

She heard the call at once, and, perceiving Jason, came directly to him. As the advanced Gray had a good chance to observe her.

It was indeed Alma Van Dyke to all outward seeming. True, she had altered a great deal, was much fuller in the face and figure, but then, a year sometimes makes a great deal of difference in a young girl; besides, she was evidently in excellent health now; before she was quite unwell and had been so for some time. Then, too, on board of the yacht she had been dressed quite plainly, as befitting such an excursion, while now, robed in a superb ball-dress, one of the masterpieces of Worth, of Paris, with her hair elaborately arranged, jeweled and laced to the highest degree, it was no wonder that she looked like a different girl from the Alma Van Dyke whose acquaintance he had made on board of the Princess.

But it was the same lady nevertheless; there was no mistake about it, and the wild idea which had entered Gray's mind when Jason parried his blow with this cunning stroke, that, by some hocus-pocus, the Owls had substituted another girl in place of the true Alma, he saw at once, upon a close inspection of the lady, had no foundation.

The girl approached, casting a wondering glance at the strangely-attired gentleman. As she did so Jason immediately proceeded to carry out the bold game upon which he had determined.

"This gentleman thinks he is an old acquaintance of yours, and so, Miss Alma, I took the liberty of calling you." Then he turned to Gray: "I will probably see you again before you leave," he remarked, and after this observation he sauntered off as carelessly as though he felt completely secure in regard to the result.

Gray and the lady looked at each other.

The eyes of the girl were the eyes of Alma Van Dyke, and yet they did not look at him as he had expected the eyes of Alma Van Dyke would look.

A strange belief suddenly came into the mind of Gray; this girl looked like Alma Van Dyke, and yet she was not the orphan heiress. Could she be an impostor—a substitute?

A few words, he was sure, would solve the riddle.

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Miss Alma Van Dyke?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," responded the lady, sweetly, in a voice that sounded like Alma's, and yet Gray was sure that it was not.

But the girl acknowledged the name, and it was plain that she believed she was entitled to it. There was no trickery—no deceit in this artless maiden; the tool of the Owls, their innocent tool, she might be, but never their confederate.

"If you are Miss Van Dyke, then of course you remember me!" Gray half asked, sorely puzzled.

"No, sir," the lady replied, evidently astonished at the question.

"You do not? Gilbert Gray, the clerk of Brevoort and Brevoort?"

"No, sir, I never saw you before."

This was a knock-down, figuratively speaking, and Gray for a moment despaired. Despite his wild idea that this girl was not the true Alma, and the supposition had not really a particle of evidence to support it, he could hardly help admitting to himself that she was, and her prompt denial of any remembrance of him was a wonder.

"But, miss, you are surely mistaken," he said; "try and remember. Don't you recollect the sail down the harbor in the yacht, just about a year ago?"

"No, sir," replied the lady, evidently puzzled, and busily racking her brains, trying to remember.

And then an idea flashed upon Gray. The girl had passed through a dreadful peril on that memorable night. She had probably been picked up by some passing craft as he had been, or cast by the waves upon the shore. Perhaps she had been rendered insensible by the terrible strain upon her powers, perhaps had suffered a long illness as a consequence thereof, and during that illness she had been delirious, and when she recovered her senses, the dreadful scene through which she had passed seemed all as unreal as the fanciful visions that a disordered brain created, and the real had vanished with the unreal when health came again. In brief, all recollection of the terrible night's adventure had been blotted completely from her memory.

This seemed the only reasonable solution of the mystery, and Gray resolved to make an earnest effort to recall the past events to her mind again.

"Miss, if you will take time to think I am sure you will be able to remember me and the trip down the harbor in the yacht."

"I have an excellent memory, sir, and I feel sure that if I had ever met you I would certainly remember it," the lady said, earnestly, evidently perplexed by the persistency of the stranger.

"It is just about a year ago—Mr. Brevoort arranged a trip down the harbor in his yacht, the Princess, expressly in your honor, but after we got outside a storm arose; you felt ill and went below, then the craft took fire. The rest, thinking that you were dead, fled to the boat and left you to your fate. I, anxious to save your body from the flames, for of course I believed that you were dead like all the rest, plucked you from the fire; but you were not dead, and while we were in the water together, after abandoning the burning yacht, you recovered the use of your senses, and I explained to you who your enemies were and what a terrible crime their necessities had driven them to. Then a ship passed us; I grasped a rope and by the force of the shock was torn from your side and you were swept away by the raging billows. I believed that you had perished until only a little while ago, learning that you were alive, I comprehended that you had escaped in some miraculous way and I came at once to see you. Now you do not remember me."

No one can judge of the lady's amazement as she listened to this strange and somewhat disconnected story, if it is remembered that she did not collect a single thing about any such scene in her life.

The idea that entered her head while Gray was earnestly relating his story was a natural one. His strange costume—the peculiar fashion in which he wore his hair—his earnest manner in telling this, to her, utterly ridiculous story, suggested to her that the gentleman was a little touched in the upper story; not exactly crazy, but so near it that he was likely to become so at any moment, and a great feeling of sympathy came up in her heart for this unfortunate young man, whose manly face and figure had made quite an impression upon her girlish fancy.

"Try to remember, miss," Gray added, earnestly, perceiving that she hesitated to reply.

"Oh, yes, sir," she said, readily and with deep sympathy in her voice, for his unhappy condition really touched her heart. "I will try to remember, and I've no doubt that in time I may be able to." These little harmless fictions are always considered allowable when dealing with the distracted mind. Opposition excites to acts of violence, but a willing agreement with the peculiar whim, strong for the time being, soothes. "And now you will have to excuse me, sir. I am engaged for the next dance. I trust that I will have the pleasure of seeing you again. Adieu!"

And she gracefully retreated, leaving Gray to curse the ill-luck which had attended the interview.

No wonder that Jason was willing he should see the girl; and Gray detected, too, that the maiden considered him as out of his mind, a sort of a harmless maniac, and the thought annoyed him terribly.

What should he do next?

The Owls had won the first trick, clearly; there was no mistaking that fact. What card then should he play now?

"Give a trifle, young gov'nor, to a poor old salt wot's fought for the Union an' lost his arm, an' you'll never miss it!" said a hoarse voice right at his elbow.

CHAPTER XV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

GRAY, turning, recognized the man at once. It was the old sailor who had acted as skipper of the yacht, but since that time he had apparently lost his arm, for his empty left sleeve was pinned to his breast.

But, although Gray knew the fellow immediately, the other was not so quick; besides, as was usual with Burt Clement in the old time, he was pretty well under the influence of liquor.

Perceiving that the gentleman did not put his hand into his pocket, the old fraud at once renewed his appeal.

"Only a trifle, young gov'nor, for to keep an old salt-sea sailor outer the work-us' in his old age. I fit like a good 'un, I did! It was at New Orleans, under the old admiral, that I lost this hyer left arm of mine than; a round shot from one of the forts took it off as clean as a whistle when we were running up the river and jest knocking their old forts down over their heads like they were built of keerds; we were a-rammmin' blazes into 'em, young gov'nor, when that blasted round shot made a crippl o' me. But the admiral, he sed the next day, sed he, 'Never you mind, old Burt; a grateful country will take care on you an' see that you won't want for nothin';' so, young gov'nor, tip us a quarter and you'll never feel it!"

"You'll buy whisky with it," suggested Gray, who saw a chance to get some information out of the old fellow.

"Mebbe I will, young gov'nor," admitted the sailor, who scorned to lie on that point, although he was not so serupulous on others. "Mebbe I will; I ain't a-goin' to lie to yo an' say that I won't, 'cos if I get dry the odds are big that I'm going to wet my whistle the surst chance I git, but I'll drink your health, young gov'nor, drink it like a gen'leman! Kin a man say more?"

"And you lost your arm in the war?"

"So I did; I ain't a-goin' to lie about it an' say that I didn't!" responded the sailor, with an appearance of great honesty.

"You're an old fraud!" exclaimed Gray, abruptly, "and I'll bet you five dollars, not only that you never lost your arm in the war—for I know that you had both of them a year ago—but you've got your left arm now hid under your shirt."

The sailor was got up in regular man's war fashion, to carry out his assumed character of a war veteran.

The redoubtable Clement was somewhat taken aback, to use the nautical phrase, at this unexpected attack, but he was too old a stager to remain so long.

"I ain't a-goin' to lie to you, young gov'nor; that ain't the sailing reg'lations that I foller, an' I ain't got no five dollars to throw away neither, but give the old man a trifle, anyway, jest for luck! Wot the blazes do you care whether I fit into the war or not? Thar's as many good men as didn't us did, an' I'm one of 'em."

"Oh, I know you—I knew you the minute I set eyes on you!" Gray observed. "You used to be on board of old Brevoort's yacht. He's here in Saratoga; why don't you go to him?"

"So I did, blazes burn him!" growled the sailor. "He was the surst man that I struck arter I got to town on this hyer lay; an' I knowed him the minit I clapped my peepers onto him. 'Hallo, gov'nor, is that you?' ses I; 'give your old skipper a trifle to help him along,' an' I'm blessed if the beggar didn't go fur to deny that he'd ever see'd me. 'Who are you?' sed he. 'Your old skipper; don't you remember the Princess, an' how, if it a hadn't a bin fur me a-warnin' you of the storm, every mother's son on us would have gone to Davy Jones's locker?' But, would you believe it? the blasted leggar sed as how he'd never see'd me in all his born days, an' ripped out that if I 'noyed him any he'd have me locked up, blast his blasted black heart, say I!" And the sailor swore in such a fluent manner that it was plain that the following of the sea doesn't tend to improve a man's language.

"He denied that he knew you?"

"So he did, the blasted son of a sea-cook!"

"Young Brevoort is here, too."

"I overbauled him, too, young gov'nor," the old salt replied, with a shake of the head, "an' he wouldn't have it, no more nor the old chap. He sed that I was a drunken old rascal—an' the man never lived, young gov'nor, wot ever see'd me soakin' in rum. I kin take my greg, an' I

likes it, too; I ain't a-goin' to lie 'bout it; but I kin walk off with it like a man. Yes, my hearty, he sed I was a drunken old rascal, that he never see'd me afore an' never wanted to ag'in! As if I keered anything 'bout that," the sailor added, with a touch of pride; "it was the color of his money that I was arter."

Gray now came at once to the point for which he had entered into conversation with the old rascal.

"Let me see: you escaped in a boat, didn't you, when the yacht took fire? You remember me, don't you? I was on board; my name is Gray."

"Sartin sur! In course I knows you! I knewed you the minit I set eyes onto you!" replied the seaman, who lied with an ease not common to every man. "Yes, young gov'nor, I saved 'em that night, every blessed mother's son on 'em. If it hadn't a bin for me, we'd never made the land."

"You picked the girl up, didn't you?"

"No, I'm blessed if we did," replied the other, "an' how she ever come to live ag'in, an' got out of that 'ere ship on fire, is wot is too much for me," and the old bummer scratched his head, reflectively.

"She is here at Saratoga."

"Yes, I know it; I've seen her, an' she tipped me a quarter, like a lady, but when I told her that I reckoned that I'd seen her afore, she only stared, an' sed she 'guessed not,' an' went away, jest like as if she thought I wa'n't satisfied, an' was arter another quarter, but that ain't the kind of man I am!"

"Allow me to contribute; good-night!" Gray put a quarter into the horny palm of the old fellow, and he closed his hand over it with a death-like grip, profusely uttering his thanks.

Gray sauntered off, passed through the hotel and came out on the street upon which the hotel was situated.

He had learned very little from the old sailor; in fact, the only point which he had gained was that both father and son were determined that everything connected with the Princess should be consigned to oblivion.

The sailor recognized Alma, but she did not remember him.

Under what potent spell, then, labored the girl to so completely destroy all recollection of the past?

Standing in front of the hotel, with contracted brows, vainly seeking some clew which would lead to the solution of this problem, Gray's attention was attracted to a well-dressed youth—a little too "loudly" dressed, perhaps, to suit good taste, who was louring up the street.

A second glance convinced Gray that he knew the stripling, and he at once called to him.

"Hallo, Jerry! Is that you?"

It was, indeed, the office-boy of the Owls, young Jerry Blake.

He was extremely delighted to meet Gray; he and the clerk had been great chums in the office, and although the boy fully believed that Gray had found a watery grave on the night when the yacht was destroyed, yet he had not forgotten him.

After the first salutations were exchanged, Gray, under the impression that the boy must be prospering greatly, judging from his dress, asked him what he was doing?

Jerry once made a full confession; he was still in the C. & C.'s office, promoted now to a desk, with a slightly increased salary, but, being desirous of seeing some of the glories of the famous watering-place, he had been saving up his money for a trip thither during his vacation, and, as he said, in conclusion:

"I tell you what it is, Mr. Gray, I've been cutting a regular shine since I've come up here. I stop at one of the toney hotels, and I sport as good clothes as any blood in the town. Oh, they take me for one of the boys, up here! I'll go it like a prince while my money lasts, and when the racket is played out I'll hop back to New York to my desk again."

"I see the Brevoorts are here."

"Yes; I saw the governor and nodded to him to-day. I tell you, he kinder opened those lit'le eyes of his, when he saw the style in which I was rigged out," and the boy swung his light case, as he spoke, in a very dandified way.

"Miss Alma Van Dyke is here, too, I see."

"Yas; I saw her out riding, to-day," the youth replied, slowly. There was something peculiar in his voice, as he spoke, and Gray was quick to detect it.

"See here, Jerry," he said, putting his arm through the other's. "Let's take a s'roll down the street. I want to speak to you about this Alma Van Dyke business."

The boy looked around him nervously as they walked along.

"Hush! don't speak so loud," he continued. "It would cost me my place in the office, if the boss knew that I talked about the matter, at all."

At last Gray felt that he was on the right scent; fortune had favored him; just by accident he had got hold of a clew.

There was a mystery about Alma Van Dyke, and the boy knew something about it; else why should he be afraid of speaking in regard to the matter.

"I don't understand why there should be any secrecy about it," Gray remarked.

"Well, I don't, exactly, except that the old man doesn't like to have the matter talked about. He has succeeded in keeping it very quiet, and I suppose he wants it to die out."

"Wants what to die out?—about the burning of the yacht? I don't comprehend it at all. I saw Miss Van Dyke, this evening, and made myself known to her, but she denied the acquaintanceship, and said that she had never seen me before in her life."

"No more has she! You never knew this Alma Van Dyke!" the boy answered.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW ALMA WAS NOT ALMA.

"I NEVER knew this Alma, eh?" Gray exclaimed, considerably astonished.

"No."

"There are two Almas, then?"

"Yes."

"Aha! well, that does solve the riddle. No wonder that the girl was astonished when I claimed to be an old acquaintance and denied that she had ever seen me before; but, Jerry, elucidate and tell me how this thing is—how comes it that this second Alma has arisen; I suppose of course that the first one is dead?"

"Yes, certainly; don't you remember that she died on board of the yacht that time we went down the bay, just before the fire broke out?"

"Oh, yes, I remember," Gray answered, immediately. He saw that the boy had no suspicion whatever of the cruel plot of the Owls which had compassed the death of the orphan heiress, and as it was no part of Gray's plan just then to reveal to any one the mischief which the crafty pair of lawyers had done he refrained from telling the boy what he knew about the supposed death of the young girl.

"You know we left her on board when we took to the boat," Jerry continued, "and for that matter you stayed, too, and I always supposed that you were burnt up."

"Oh, no! when the fire got too hot I jumped overboard."

"I would have thought you would have been drowned!" exclaimed the youth, in wonder. "We were in a boat, but I tell you we had an awful time to make the shore."

"I had a life-preserved that kept me from sinking, and I was picked up very soon by a passing vessel."

"Oh, yes, I see; but it must have been a narrow squeeze."

"Tighter than I care to risk again in a hurry; but about this Alma?"

"Yes; well, when we got back to the office the next morning after the fire Mr. Brevoort found that there had been a pretty sharp trick played upon him in regard to the girl, and that she wasn't the real Alma at all."

"Not the real Alma!" cried Gray, completely astonished by this revelation, which was the last thing he expected to hear.

"No, sir; it was one of the sharpest tricks that I ever heard of, and you know, Mr. Gray, that I've been in a lawyer's office for some time."

"And therefore used to sharp tricks and a judge of them, eh?"

"Well, a fellow can't stay with the Owls, you know, and not be up to a thing or two."

"Quite right; but, what was the nature of this trick?"

"Why, this girl who was on board of the yacht wasn't the real Alma any more than you are."

"That is about as unlikely as well can be."

"It was all a trick to defraud Mr. Brevoort. Doctor O'Hoolihan owned up after the false Alma was dead."

"Oh, Doctor O'Hoolihan owned up, did he?" Gray began now to have a slight suspicion of the trick that had been played, not the one that the boy was telling about, but the clever stratagem by means of which the Owls had substituted a living, false Alma for the dead, true one. Gray was a pretty good judge of men and he had speedily taken the measure, as the saying is, of the so-called doctor.

"Oh, yes, he got frightened when he found that the girl was dead, and he thought that it would be better for him to own up to the truth."

"And what was the truth?" exclaimed Gray, impatiently. He could not conceal the eagerness that he felt to get at the full particulars of the Owls' scheme.

"Why, you must know that old Martin Van Dyke, the father of the girl, had two children—one named Agnes, she was the eldest—they were both girls—and the other named Alma, but Agnes was the child of the first wife, who was also called Agnes—Agnes Percival. Van Dyke was twice married; the first wife, a short time after her marriage with Mr. Van Dyke, whom she married solely for his money, forced into the match by her parents, eloped with a former lover and fled to England, and there this first girl, Agnes, was born. Van Dyke never believed that the child was his, and therefore he made no efforts at all to recover it. He got a divorce immediately, and in a very short time married wife number two, the mother of

Alma. He never troubled his head at all about the first wife, and never heard from her until about five years after the time when she ran away; then he received word from England that both she and the man with whom she had eloped had suddenly died, leaving the child, helpless and unprotected. With her dying breath the mother consigned the girl to Mr. Van Dyke's care, declaring that it was his child, and that she had always been a good, pure woman until she was persuaded into the fatal step that fate, apparently, had seen fit to punish with death. Of course, Mr. Gray, the word of a woman on her death-bed ought to be believed, but Mr. Van Dyke was a very odd man about some things, and though he said that he would take care of the child and see that she should not want for anything yet he would not own it for his own; and so it happened that Alma, the younger of the two, he made his heir when he died, only leaving enough to the other one to give her a decent support.

"But, to go back: right after the death of the first wife, the second one died, too, and Mr. Van Dyke, who was a man pretty well advanced in years even at the time of his first marriage, and who was always odd and peculiar in his notions, took it into his head that the woman in England, who had taken care of the first girl, would be a good person to look after the second. She was a cousin of this Doctor O'Hoolihan. So he made a bargain with the woman to take charge of Alma, and she was packed off to England—the other girl being turned over to another woman's care, for the father was determined that the two should not be brought up together.

"Of course, as was only natural, Mr. Gray, the woman was a great deal more attached to the child whom she had brought up—for she had been with the mother from the time she arrived in England up to the period of her death—than to the other one; and this woman knew that the second child, and not the first, would be the heir to all the old man's wealth; so she and Doctor O'Hoolihan arranged a plan by means of which they thought they could secure a good income for all the rest of their lives. The two little girls were just about the same size, and, despite the fact that one was nearly two years older than the other, they looked enough alike to be twins; so O'Hoolihan and the woman resolved to substitute the one for the other. Alma they called Agnes, and Agnes, Alma."

"Oh!" exclaimed Gray, drawing a long breath as he saw how skillfully the Owls had extricated themselves from the difficulty into which the success of their own plot had plunged them.

But Gray was not at all deceived by this yarn. He understood well enough that the changing of the two girls had not been done when they were little children, but quite recently.

The Owls had doomed Alma to a terrible death in order to gain the life insurance money, but when they found that a vast amount of wealth awaited the living girl, hey, presto! they produced her again. Alma dead—dead through their own vile practices—they brought forward Agnes, and easily induced O'Hoolihan and his cousin, the woman who had had charge of the two, to "confess" that she had changed the children when they were little.

It was a remarkable scheme—remarkable for its boldness and the ease with which it could be carried out, and it had been carried out, too.

There was no mistake about it—the true Alma was dead, and in the "dark, unfathomed caves of ocean" her bones were buried. Agnes Percival now flaunted it as Alma Van Dyke, but could he, Gray, prove that this was so?

Ah! that was a riddle that time alone could solve!

"Ah, I comprehend it now," Gray remarked. "It is no wonder that the girl did not recognize me, or looked at me as though she thought I was crazy when I recalled the yacht excursion to her mind."

"Of course, Mr. Gray, you'll keep quiet about this," the lad suggested. "It would cost me my place in the office if it should come to the ears of the Owls that I have been blabbing."

"Oh, you may rely upon me, Jerry," Gray assured, instantly. "I felt curious about the matter, of course, for I thought I knew the lady and I wondered how it was she did not remember me."

"Well, you know now; but, I say, what are you driving at? You look like a Western poet."

"I'm in the mining business out West, and we do dress rather 'keerless' out there."

"Do you know, Mr. Gray, I always wanted to go out West and try my hand at that?" the lad exclaimed. "I've got tired of digging away in the office. Popgun and I have talked the matter over a good deal—you remember Popgun?"

Gray nodded.

"Well, Popgun and I are going to try our luck in the Black Hills, just as soon as we can get ready."

"That is where I am—only a little way from Deadwood."

"Why, that's exactly where we are going!"

"I'll give you a chance any time you like," and then Gray consulted his watch. He had an appointment at nine; so he told the boy he would see him again, and then returned to the gardens of the Grand Union.

A lady at Saratoga had written to the superintendent of the Little Montana mine desiring certain information, to which Gray, who held that position, replied, and after a couple of letters had been exchanged she begged him to come East that she might see him in person, offering to pay all expenses.

The letters were signed Lucia Romola, and now, at the appointed spot for the meeting, Gray waited for her coming. Prompt to the moment she appeared, and great was the astonishment of the superintendent of the Little Montana as he saw her approach.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE AUSTRALIAN SONG-BIRD.

The lady came from the hotel, arrayed like a princess, and as beautiful a girl as there was in all Saratoga, which is saying a great deal when it is considered that the acknowledged belles of the North, South, East and West congregate at that noted watering-place during the fashionable season.

But, it was not the girl's dress, superb although it was; it was not the costly gems that sparkled upon her person that attracted the attention of the superintendent of the Little Montana; it was something in the girl's walk; and then, as she came nearer, something about her face that fixed the lively Mr. Gray stolid as a statue.

As the old Owl had long ago discovered, there was a great resemblance between Miss Romola and Alma Van Dyke—the true Alma, who was believed by all to be sleeping the long sleep that knows no earthly waking beneath the ocean billows. Like to the false Alma too, was she, although the strong, determined will that plainly shone in her face gave an entirely different expression to her features to that worn by the other, whose mild, yielding nature was clearly revealed in her face.

But, Gray was not deceived, although the Owls had been; the eyes of love were quicker than the orbs of hate, and the "thoroughbred" jumped immediately to the truth.

The girl smiled as she came up to him; her memory also was not at fault, although Gray was about the last man in the world whom she expected to see. Like his own yielding to the belief that she had found a grave where the wild waves sweep, she had thought that he had not survived that night of peril when the Princess became the prey of the fire-screams.

The recognition was mutual.

"Is it possible that I behold Miss Alma Van Dyke?" Gray exclaimed, as the lady came up to him.

"Oh, no," she replied, with a half-sad smile. "Alma Van Dyke, the orphan heiress of Martin Van Dyke, and the sole owner of all of Richard Van Dyke's vast mining property, including the Little Montana lode which you control, is yonder in the ball-room, in company with the old and young lawyers who call themselves Brevoort and Brevoort."

"Two of the biggest rascals that ever went unhung!" Gray exclaimed, and his face plainly showed that he believed what he said.

"I trust in time to prove that, and to hold them up to the scorn of all the world!" There was a world of firm determination in the girl's face and voice.

"But, you are Alma Van Dyke are you not?"

"Yes, although these villains say that I am not, and never was. They believe me dead, and so they coolly put forward this girl, Agnes, my half-sister, in my place, and thus deliberately rob me not only of my fortune but even of my very name."

"This is a most wonderful meeting to me," Gray observed, thoughtfully. "I met the other Alma this evening, not twenty paces from where we now stand, and, deceived by the likeness that she bears to you, I accosted her and tried to recall myself to her recollection, but the attempt was a failure; to my utter surprise she denied that she had ever seen me."

"It was the truth, as you see now; but I do not wonder that you were deceived; there is a striking resemblance between us. But, Mr. Gray, I am as much astonished at this meeting as you are; although we have corresponded, I had no suspicion that the Mr. Gray of the Little Montana mine was the Mr. Gray who once risked his life to save me from a horrid death."

Gray blushed like a young girl—tough man of the world as he was.

"Pray don't speak of it, miss; I only did my duty; to have done less would only have been to render myself unworthy the name of man."

"But I shall never forget to thank you, sir, all the same," she replied, sweetly, and with a look that sent the hot blood dancing and tingling through the veins of the young man.

"When you were torn so rudely from me," she continued, "I gave myself up for lost, but Heaven itself seemed to watch over me on that dreadful night. In a very short time after you were swept from my side a large ship came sailing by; a vivid *flash* of lightning which lit up

the sky and made all as light as day, enabled the sailors on the look-out to discover me, tossing upon the surface of the waves. They immediately lowered a boat, while the ship put about, and picked me up. The vessel was an Australian one and bound for that country. Knowing as I did of the wicked plot which had been formed against me I was urged to a strange resolution. I told the captain, who, naturally, was anxious to know what accident had caused my peril, the particulars of the yacht taking fire and how in the confusion I had been left behind in the cabin, and that I did not believe any one had escaped, nor did I, at the time, for I did not think that so small a boat as the one attached to the yacht could live in such a sea. The captain said that he would endeavor to speak a New York bound craft so that I could return to the city, but I told him I did not care to return; I had no friends there, and that even the parties with whom I was on board of the yacht were only my father's lawyers, and that Australia, being an English colony, would seem more like home to me, as I had always lived in England since I was a child, than my own native land. The captain, who was a kind, fatherly man, with grown-up daughters of his own, as he told me, asked me if I had money enough to keep me until I could communicate with my friends in England. I did not tell him that I did not know where to look for a friend in all this wide world, but I answered that I had quite a little sum of money in my pocket-book. As it had luckily happened, Mr. Brevoort had given me two hundred dollars, pin-money, as he called it, upon my arrival in New York, and I had not spent a single penny of it."

"It was indeed most fortunate," Gray observed, listening to the recital with the closest attention.

"I knew that the two hundred dollars would keep me for quite a while, and afford me time to put into execution a scheme which I had conceived, forced to it by my dire necessities. From early childhood I have always been passionately fond of music, and my father spared no expense to give me the most complete musical education money could buy. I had the best of teachers, who all said that my voice was something wonderful, and that with the training which I had enjoyed, if I chose to go on the operatic stage, I would make a name and fortune second to no artist that had ever appeared. Of course, as the heiress of my father's wealth, such a career seemed utterly out of the question, but when I found that I had to battle for existence, depending solely on my own exertions, I at once resolved to become a vocalist. In Australia I made the attempt and attained success at a single bound. My future immediately became secure. Money poured in upon me and never did miser hoard gold as I hoarded my gains, for I had a great purpose in view and I knew that money was the sinews of war. I had resolved, as soon as I felt myself strong enough, to return to America and hunt down and give to justice these rascally lawyers who so well deserved the punishment of the law."

"It is a bold game, miss, and if you will accept my aid, I will gladly tender it."

"The very thing I would have asked!" she exclaimed. "I need a man's strong arm, for the fight will be a long and difficult one."

"True enough, Miss Alma; the Brevoorts have planned with fiendish cunning. They have managed this substitution of one child for the other with such skill that it will be difficult for us to prove that it has been done, and then there is trouble, too, about the mine; the title is not clear; there is a heavy claim which Dick Van Dyke, your uncle, miss, was supposed to have paid off, but the satisfaction-paper cannot be found."

"I know where it is!" Alma responded, quickly. "Uncle Dick came to see me in England only a little more than a year ago, and he told me then that I should be his heir, and he described his mine, and the wild life that he led, and how he concealed his important papers, and he laughingly added that he classed his letters under that head, and in those letters, mine and my father's, there is ample proof of my identity. I was born with a peculiar birthmark—one of my little toes, the one on the left foot, is almost wanting, and right after my birth my father wrote to his brother and described this peculiarity."

"A letter in your father's hand will be strong evidence indeed; but where are these papers concealed?"

"In a leaden casket hidden away in a secret spot in Spearfish canyon."

"I know the canyon, miss—every foot of it!"

"And I can identify the spot where the casket is concealed; so, if you please, we'll start for the Black Hills as soon as possible."

"I'm ready at a moment's notice!"

"By the first train, then, to-morrow!"

"I'll be on hand."

"At the depot, then, I'll meet you. Good-by!"

She extended her hand; their palms met; the touch thrilled Gray in every vein, and then they parted.

An alliance, offensive and defensive, had been entered into: now let the Owls look to themselves!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EAVESDROPPER.

The pair had parted with joyful faces, for the unexpected meeting had been much comfort to both of them, and neither one of the two doubted that they would succeed in beating the crafty lawyers in the struggle which was to come.

Of course neither one of the two had the slightest suspicion that mortal ear had overheard any part of their conversation. But, as Gray had remarked, and with a great deal of truth, the Owls were singularly lucky.

And in this instance Dame Fortune had deigned to befriend the lawyers in the most signal manner.

From one of the windows of the hotel, which looked upon the garden, concealed by a curtain, Jason had watched the interview between the false Alma and the man from Deadwood, and although he was not near enough to overhear the words that passed between the two, yet from the expression upon their faces it was easy enough for him to comprehend how matters were going.

And as the false Alma gracefully bowed herself away from the seeker-after-knowledge, and came toward the hotel with a puzzled look upon her pretty face, the young Owl laughed quietly to himself.

"Your first move has failed, Mr. Gilbert Gray!" he exclaimed, in triumph, communing with himself; "the trick is mine. You have played the best card that you have in your hand and now that your attack has failed, the quicker you get out the better."

He stepped forward to meet the young beauty, whom he and his father had so craftily put forward in the place of the girl whom they had doomed to such a cruel death.

To Jason the false Alma at once related the particulars of her interview with the strange gentleman, winding up with the declaration that she didn't really believe he was in his right mind; an opinion in which Jason at once agreed.

The crafty young Owl explained that the stranger had said that he was an old acquaintance, and he, supposing that the man's story was true, had paved the way for an interview, never suspecting that there was anything wrong about the fellow, although he admitted, with an appearance of great frankness, that the man certainly did look odd and wild.

The heiress's attention was claimed at that moment by an admirer to whom she had promised a dance; so Jason was left to his own reflections. Singulalry contented, too, he felt just at that moment; and in order the better to meditate over the extreme good luck which had enabled him to defeat the attack that Mr. Gray had planned so carefully, he lit a cigar and strolling out into the garden entered a retired summer-house, almost completely hid by shrubs and trailing vines.

And, as luck would have it, to the neighborhood of this very summer-house came the true Alma and the superintendent of the Little Montana to hold their interview.

So it happened that Jason overheard every word of the conversation between the two, without intending to do so.

A cold perspiration came to his brow as the girl revealed herself.

Lucia Romola then, the Australian song-bird, was Alma Van Dyke!

In a state of breathless suspense he listened to the conversation between the two, only to curse the stupidity which had enabled the girl so cleverly to deceive him.

He had been blind—criminally blind, and but for the lucky chance which had enabled him to overhear the conversation to which he was now listening, he would have been completely taken by surprise. But as it was, forewarned now was to be forearmed.

No wonder that the suspicions of the old Owl had been excited by the girl! The dull eyes of age had been gifted with far more penetration than the clear orbs of youth.

After the twain had departed, and had got fairly beyond observation, Jason came from the summer-house, his face very pale and his nerves all aquiver.

The peril indeed was near and dangerous.

"I must see the old man at once," he muttered. "We must prepare immediately to resist this fresh attack. By what miracle did this feeble girl escape the peril of wind and wave, the fury of the flames and rise again to menace us?"

The Owl forgot that he hand of Heaven itself was in this thing, and that Providence was fighting on the side of the orphan girl.

Man plans but fate oftentimes disposes in this life of ours, else what chance would the weak and helpless have against the strong and cruel.

Jason went at once in search of his father. He found the old lawyer enjoying a comfortable nap in an easy-chair in a retired corner of the parlor. Suddenly awakened, he listened with the utmost attention to the young man's story, in fact, listened so placidly that Jason

began to fear his father was not comprehending the full force of the shock.

But the old Owl was a far abler man than the young one, and even while Jason was telling the story he was setting his wits to work to devise some way to break the force of this new and unexpected attack.

"It is really a most astounding thing, father," Jason observed, concluding his recital. "I knew there was something peculiar about the girl, but I had no idea that she would so suddenly develop into a bitter and active enemy."

"I told you, all along, that she was dangerous," the old man replied. "But you wouldn't listen to me. I tell you what it is, Jason, I've lived some time in this world, and I have always noticed that when any great blow is about to fall upon me, I have a presentiment of it beforehand. I knew that that girl was dangerous, although, of course, I hadn't the remotest idea she would turn out to be the heiress, for I thought that we had most certainly settled her, as far as this world is concerned."

The veteran rascal spoke as coolly as though the life of Alma Van Dyke was worth no more than a rabbit's.

"What is to be done? These two together mean mischief. The girl would be bad enough, but, aided by Gray, she most surely will bring us to destruction."

"Oh, no, not at all," answered the father, with perfect coolness. "That does not follow, although I have no doubt it will be a tough fight—that is, if we come to fighting at all."

"But, how are you going to avoid it?" Jason asked in amazement. "They mean war, and war to the knife, unless you have made up your mind to tamely yield everything to this girl. If you have, I haven't."

"My dear boy, you wrong your father by such a supposition. Did you ever know me to let go of anything that I had fairly got my clutches on?"

"Never!"

"Well, I don't intend to begin now, but I will own to you, frankly, that I think it will be better to compromise the matter. There is money enough in the affair for all of us. We'll do the fair thing by her, my boy; we'll give her half, and that ought to satisfy her."

"But it will not, father, I am sure of it!" Jason cried, earnestly. "She is hungry for vengeance upon us for the great wrongs we have done her."

"Wrongs! Fiddlesticks!" exclaimed the old Owl, testily. "She's all right, now, alive and well, and if she is wise, she will not provoke us into a fight."

"But she will do it."

"So much the worse for her, then."

"I have an idea in my head in regard to Gray, now."

"Good! Nothing like acting promptly."

"I can spring a trap upon him this very night."

"The quicker the better, for in war there is nothing to be gained by delay. If an attack is to be made, rush at it the moment you are ready."

"The first point, of course, is to separate Gray and the girl!"

"Exactly; divide and conquer; a very old adage, and an extremely true one."

"If my scheme succeeds, I'll have him in jail on a pretty serious charge, this very night."

The old Owl opened his eyes.

"Well, well; that is going at it with a vengeance."

"Oh, I owe the fellow a grudge; but for him the girl would never have escaped from the burning yacht."

"Jason, I always told you that that fellow was a limb of Satan!" the old man observed, with a wise shake of the head.

"We'll put him where he will be harmless; and then, when this girl starts for the Black Hills to secure this leaden casket, which she says is concealed somewhere in the canyon of the Spearfish, we will be close behind."

"Exactly, exactly; she shall be our pointer dog to scent out for us the precious papers, and when she finds them we will step forward and possess ourselves of them."

"You do not think there is any doubt about this leaden casket?"

"Not the slightest, my boy; old Dick Van Dyke was one of the oddest men in the world; he never did anything like anybody else; even the term, leaden casket, is probably romancing a bit; it is more likely to turn out to be a sardine box or cracker can, than anything else."

Just at this moment Jason caught sight of Gray's tall figure passing through the entry.

"There he is, now; you go for a policeman, father, and be near at hand ready to come forward at my call."

"All right: I know the officer in the house."

"Good! now, then, we'll put a little salt on the tail of our bird!" and the young Owl at once hastened after Gray.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CLEVER TRAP.

When Jason reached the entry the man from Deadwood was half-way up the stairs, evidently going to his sleeping chamber, and the young

Owl paused for a moment until the old one came up.

"He is going up-stairs," Jason said; "I will follow and arrange it so that I will overtake him on the second landing. You and the policeman wait on the first until I give the signal. I will lean over the railing and call you, then ascend at once, for I will have everything in readiness to spring the trap upon him."

"Muzzle him, Jason; muzzle him or he will work us much mischief!" the old lawyer warned.

"Don't fear in regard to that," the son replied, confidently; "I've got a trap ready for him that he is sure to walk into. The chances are a hundred to one in my favor. But, don't delay, for it won't take long to bring about the explosion of the mine."

"I'll be ready with the officer in ten minutes at the outside!" cried the father, promptly.

"Within ten minutes I shall be ready, too."

"There is the officer now," and the old lawyer nodded toward the end of the entry, where indeed the private officer attached to the house was lounging. "What is the 'tip,' my boy, that I am to give him?"

"Robbery."

"All right."

The father started for the officer and Jason pursued Gray up the stairs.

The Man from New York, now the superintendent of the Little Montana, was proceeding on his way in a particularly happy state of mind.

All that had occurred during the past hour had been very much to his liking, and he was just reflecting upon how inscrutable are the ways of Providence, when the young Owl overtook him, just as he had gained the upper landing as Jason had planned.

"Hallo, Gray, wait a moment!" exclaimed the young Owl; "I want to speak to you."

"Ah, my jovial Jason, is that you?" Gray replied, feeling in the best of spirits with himself and everybody else, the Owls included, for the knowledge of conscious power was strong within him, and he felt sure that he was fully able to cope with the lawyers and beat them even at their own crafty game.

"Yes, I want to have a few minutes' conversation."

"Certainly, I'm agreeable; will you ascend to my room? It's on the next flight."

"Oh, no, it is not worth while to take the trouble. I've only got a few words to say, and I can say them here as well as elsewhere."

"Just as you please; go ahead."

"I have been reflecting over the little conversation that we had together this evening, and I have come to the conclusion that it will not pay either of us to quarrel: we cannot make anything by it. In fact, I want to square this matter with you, to use the sporting phrase."

"Well, I'm just the man to listen to reason," Gray remarked, a quiet smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

"You see how strong we are in this matter—"

"Oh, yes, very strong!" and this time Gray could not refrain from expanding his features in a broad grin, much to the annoyance of the young scamp, who understood well enough why he smiled, and the lawyer felt a mad desire to strike the smiling Westerner to his feet, so great was the rage that burned within his breast; but, with a great effort he restrained himself, and neither by word or look betrayed the passion which was so strong in his heart.

"And it would only be the height of folly for you to attempt to contend with us," continued Jason, finishing the speech.

"Well, you have planned matters pretty well, I admit," Gray replied, slowly, just as if he was deliberating over the affair, "but then you know things in this world are so deuced uncertain. It looks now as if you had everything your own way, but, hey, presto! there may come a sudden change, and you will find that your position is not half as strong as you thought it was."

Again it required a powerful effort on the part of the young lawyer to keep from betraying his anger, for, holding, as he did, the keys to the situation in his own hands by his knowledge of the interview between Gray and the girl, he fully understood that Gray, in his sleeve, was laughing at him.

"Be that as it may," Jason replied; "for the present the advantage is with me."

"Yes, it *appears* so," Gray rejoined, quietly, but despite himself he emphasized the word "appears," as Jason's quick ear detected.

"I have always been a firm believer in the old Spanish proverb which says, 'Build a bridge of gold for a flying enemy,' and although, as I observed, all the advantage is with me, or *appears* to be with me, yet I am willing that you should not have all your trouble for nothing. You see that you cannot do anything with Miss Alma; all memory of what happened on board of the yacht is completely blotted out of her mind—as completely as though the events had never transpired; in fact, she looks upon you as a man who is slightly touched in the upper story. So you see, all hope of doing anything

in that quarter might as well be abandoned. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. Here's a hundred dollars which I will give you to pay your expenses back to the Black Hills, provided that you start to-morrow."

"A hundred dollars, eh?" remarked Gray, musingly, his eyes fixed upon the crisp, new bank bills that Jason had taken from his pocket-book.

"Yes, a hundred dollars; I cannot afford to go any more; and in fact I think, considering the circumstances, that I am making you a very liberal offer."

"Oh, yes, very liberal."

"Well, do you accept?"

A great idea had come into the mind of the superintendent of the Little Montana. Here was an opportunity to have a rich joke at the expense of the Owls. The hundred dollars was offered as the sole condition of quitting Saratoga and departing immediately for the Black Hills—the very thing he had arranged to do upon the morrow. Why not take the money and use it to accomplish the overthrow of the crafty lawyers' schemes? There was justice with a vengeance!

The opportunity was too good—the chance too tempting to be lost, and Gray resolved to embrace it.

"It is a bargain, Jason!" he exclaimed. "Give me the money and I will agree to depart by the first train to-morrow for Deadwood."

"Here you are then—five twenty-dollar bills, one, two, three, four, five," and the young Owl counted the notes into the hands of the adventurer.

"I'm a greenback man, just about this time!" Gray exclaimed, as he folded up the crisp bank-notes and thrust them carelessly into the watch-pocket of his peculiar pantaloons with which his neither limbs were adorned. "Fare you well, then, for I'm off for Deadwood by the first train to-morrow!"

"Hold on a bit!" cried the young lawyer, anger flaming in his face and plainly visible in his tones; "I am not through with you yet!"

Gray turned in astonishment for this move on the part of the plotting lawyer was entirely unexpected.

"Hallo! help there, police!" continued Jason, calling out loudly.

And promptly in obedience to the summons, old Brevoort, followed by the house officer, came up the stairs.

For the first time Gray comprehended that the young Owl had tricked him, and that he had become entangled in some sort of a plot.

"Arrest that man! I have been robbed!" cried Jason, when the officer gained the landing.

The loud tones in which the announcement was made penetrated into the sleeping apartments adjoining the entry, and doors began to open and heads to protrude, curious to learn the cause of the commotion.

"Hold on a moment; don't lay your hands upon me!" cried Gray, warningly, as the officer approached—that official having previously been posted by the old Owl.

"I am a regular officer of the law, sir," replied the man, respectfully, throwing open his coat and showing a shield upon the lapel, "and I would counsel you not to offer resistance."

"I have been robbed of one hundred dollars, five twenty-dollar bills, all new bills, and marked with the stamp of our office. I suspect this fellow of having stolen them from me in the garden, to night, for on two or three occasions he has taken advantage of the crowd to brush up against me. You had better search him, officer; I have no doubt you will find the money on his person. I can identify the bills easily."

A murmur of wonder now came from the crowd of people gathering in the entry, more or less attired, for many of them had been roused from sleep by the unusual noise.

Gray at last comprehended the nature of the trap which the young Owl had formed so carefully and into which he had so stupidly fallen, and so cunningly was it contrived that escape seemed well-nigh impossible.

"No need to search me, officer; I have the money that he speaks of," and Gray produced the bills, "but, as to having stolen them, it is a most infamous lie!"

CHAPTER XX.

AN UNEXPECTED TURN OF AFFAIRS.

"A LIE!" cried Jason, an expression of great contempt appearing upon his face; "tell that to the justice before whom you will appear to-morrow. Away with him, officer, and you had better take charge of the money and mark it so that you will be able to identify it at his examination."

Victory was with the Owls; Gray felt that he was fairly in the toils, and for the life of him he could not see any way out of the trap at present.

"You are my prisoner, sir," said the officer, laying his hand upon the shoulder of Gray. The first impulse of The Man from New York was to knock the fellow down, but sober second thought restrained his arm. The man was simply doing his duty and was not in the least

to blame; and Gray felt, too, that any display of violence would only result in making his position worse even than it was at present; so he resolved to submit with a good grace, contenting himself with a vigorous protest.

"I am the victim of a most villainous plot!" he exclaimed, energetically, "and no man knows it better than this vile rascal," and he shook his fist defiantly at the young Owl, who only laughed in derision, for he thought that he had his enemy securely caged. "When I am examined to-morrow the truth will appear, and then I will have full and ample satisfaction for this outrage."

"Keep a tight hold on him, officer, for he will probably try to slip out of your hands and take to his heels the moment he is in the street and a fair chance is afforded him," the young owl counseled.

"You need not be at all alarmed, officer," Gray retorted, instantly. "This knave knows well enough that there is not the slightest danger of my doing anything of the kind. A guilty man flies, but I am not guilty, as my examination to-morrow will prove," and he signified to the officer that he was ready to accompany him. The two proceeded down-stairs, the observed of all observers, while the two Owls chuckled over the success of their scheme.

It really did look as if they had got Mr. Gilbert Gray in a pretty tight place, but this is a very uncertain world.

Gray was conducted at once to the lock-up, which was not exactly as comfortable as his snug apartment in the Grand Union, but during the somewhat wild life he had led he had been in even worse quarters, and with true philosophy he prepared to make the best of the situation.

The officer and the keeper of the jail had a little confab after the prisoner was bestowed in his cell. The officer was an old New York man and was pretty well posted in the ways of the world.

"This ain't any common affair," he said, confidentially, to the jailer. "This chap ain't any pickpocket, or anything of that kind. It looks to me either like a sort of a family row or a put-up job to get this duck out of the way for a time. This story that young Brevoort tells about this chap rubbing up against him and robbing him in the crowd is altogether too thin."

"He don't look like a chap of that kidney," the keeper of the lock-up admitted.

"And he isn't, either; you jest mark my words, there's more in this matter than shows on the surface now."

To this conclusion the jailer assented, and the conversation was interrupted at this moment by the appearance of one of the clerks of the Grand Union Hotel, who came hurrying in all out of breath.

The clerk's mission was to see if it was possible to bail the prisoner out at once, much to the astonishment of the other two, who hadn't the remotest idea why the Grand Union folks should interest themselves about Gray, even if he was stopping at the hotel, considering that he was a perfect stranger.

To bail the prisoner that night, though, was almost impossible, as the jailer explained to the Grand Union gentleman; and he observed, too, that Mr. Gray would really experience no great harm by his brief detention, as he was quite comfortably provided for; whereat the clerk expressed himself satisfied, but begged for the privilege of a few minutes' conversation with the prisoner, which was at once granted by the accommodating jailer.

Gray was considerably surprised by the visit, and still more surprised by the assurance that the hotel gentleman gave that there wasn't any doubt but what he would come out all right, and that he must not worry, for all that money could do, would be done.

Gray expressed his thanks, and some little astonishment as well, whereupon the clerk winked mysteriously and withdrew; and this slight circumstance gave the prisoner a clew to the riddle.

The Man from New York, being a man of easy conscience, slept that night just as well in the Saratoga jail as though lodged in the most luxurious apartment the famous watering-place could boast.

Morning came; a superb breakfast was sent over from the hotel, to which the superintendent of the Little Montana did full justice, and then, when court opened, Gray was brought before it.

He found that able counsel had already been engaged for him, and that nothing had been left undone to make a vigorous fight.

The Brevoorts were on hand, and Gray's case was soon called.

The young Owl was put upon the witness-stand, and he told a very plain, straightforward story.

The prisoner had accosted him in the garden and introduced himself, as an old employé of the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort, a claim which he, Jason, at once recognized, but when the prisoner asked for assistance, he declined to aid him to the extent that the other desired. Having some twenty-dollar bills in his pocket

he had tendered the prisoner the loan of one, but he had not been satisfied with that sum and had solicited more, coupling the request with sundry threats in regard to certain matters connected with the office of Brevoort and Brevoort in the old time when he was connected with it.

Jason, according to his story, had immediately defied the other to do his worst, for, as he candidly admitted, he had a decided aversion to being blackmailed. The prisoner and he had parted on bad terms, but two or three times during the evening he had come in contact with him in the crowded ball-room or on the piazza outside; and so, when he missed the roll of twenty-dollar bills he came to the conclusion that the prisoner had taken it, as he was aware of the exact spot where he kept the money.

This finished the young Owl's examination, for, much to Jason's surprise, the counsel in charge of Gray's case declined to cross-examine him.

The Brevoorts looked at each other, for they did not understand this at all, and a presentiment of evil oppressed them.

The officer who had arrested Gray next gave his evidence, and after the prosecution was through with him, Gray's lawyer put a few simple questions, seeking to plainly establish the fact that old Brevoort had told him that his son had been robbed, that he, Jason, had followed the man up-stairs, and that when the alarm was given, they, old Brevoort and the officer, were to ascend.

There were no other witnesses, and the counsel for the prisoner said that he would let his client tell his simple story, for he felt sure that it would carry conviction with it; and Gray, in the prisoner's box, told his tale—a brief and accurate account of what had really happened between himself and the young Owl, suppressing merely Alma's name, which was not particularly material.

The Owls listened with an incredulous smile upon their faces, but for the rest of the listeners they were strangely perplexed, for the adventurer's story sounded like truth.

Gray was subjected to a severe cross-examination, but his story was not shaken in the least.

"Have you any witnesses to support this story?" the judge asked; he was a genial, good-natured old gentleman who had grown gray upon the bench.

"No, your honor; there was no one present but myself and the man who has brought the accusation against me."

"And you, Mr. Brevoort, have you any further proof to offer?"

"No, your honor; but my oath surely ought to prevail against the word of this man whose reputation in the past has been none of the best," young Brevoort answered, assuming an expression of wonder, as if amazed that there should be any doubt about the matter.

"Well, luckily, gentlemen, for the truth in this matter, there was a witness to the interview between you two," observed the judge, in an extremely quiet way. If a bombshell had burst in the center of the court it could not have excited greater wonder than did this remark.

The Brevoorts stared at each other in angry surprise; Gray looked amazed, and the spectators fairly gaped in wonder.

Then, in obedience to a signal from the judge, one of the court officers conducted Alma Van Dyke—the true Alma, or as she was better known to Saratoga—Lucia Romola to the witness stand.

As it happened, the interview between the two men had taken place close to the door of her apartment, and the door being slightly ajar she had overheard every word that had passed between the two, and with her own eyes witnessed the latter part of the scene.

Her evidence was indeed conclusive. Gray was triumphantly acquitted; the Brevoorts sneaked out of court, dismissed with a stinging reprimand from the judge, and so ended the scheme that was to fetter the limbs of gay Gilbert Gray.

CHAPTER XXI.

WESTWARD HO!

THE Brevoorts did not linger long in Saratoga after their overwhelming defeat, but with the false Alma departed. As they explained to the girl, whom they kept in blissful ignorance of their schemes, they were tired of the inland watering place and sighed for Long Branch and the salt air of the ocean; and she, more child than woman, was delighted with the change.

Never since the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort had existed had their carefully laid plans been so completely and utterly defeated.

The appearance of the true Alma and her testimony had been entirely unexpected.

The Owls fled; apparently they abandoned the field of battle, but Gray felt sure that this was not the case. He knew the lawyers too well to believe that they would tamely yield, after a single struggle. He believed that they had fled so as to prevent him from gaining access to the girl whom they had presented to the world as Alma Van Dyke. Of course with all

his shrewd wit it was clearly impossible for him to guess that the Owls were as well informed as he was in regard to the true Alma, thanks to the lucky accident which had enabled the crafty lawyer to overhear the story so graphically told by the young girl who had passed through so many strange adventures.

As Gray said to the lady whose quarrel he had espoused, after the scene in the court-room was ended, and he had learned of the departure of the villainous pair:

"They have departed in order to throw us off our guard while they plot new schemes; but, we will show them a trick worth two of that. While they are deliberating and planning we will be on our way to the Black Hills. There we will secure the leaden casket, and then, when we have the proofs as to the ownership of the mine in our hands, also the letters which will be sure to establish your identity as the true Alma, we will tear off the mask, throw down the gauntlet and challenge the Owls to come into the courts and fight us for the Van Dyke property."

The idea was good and the orphan girl at once assented.

No time was to be lost, and Gray, fearful lest some untoward chance might reveal to the Brevoorts that they had departed for the West, took all possible care to cover up his trail, totally ignorant of course that the Owls were as well acquainted with his plans as he was himself.

He procured tickets for New York and had the baggage checked through, but at Albany he got tickets to Buffalo, and had the baggage rechecked; then from Buffalo he went to Pittsburg, and from Pittsburg, believing that by this doubling about the country he had completely disguised his trail, he went directly west via Chicago and Omaha.

Just before reaching Omaha, the train upon which they were passengers, ran off the track, and although no serious damage to life and limb resulted, yet the passengers got a pretty severe shaking up.

Gray had calculated to lay-over for a day and a night at Omaha in order to break the journey, and, although Alma had believed that the rest would refresh her so that she would be able to proceed, as originally planned, yet when the time came, a slight fever—a sort of nervous attack had set in, the result of the accident on the rail, and the doctor whom Gray had insisted upon calling in, advised that the lady should not attempt to resume her journey under a week at the least, unless, indeed, it was a matter of life and death; rest must be had if possible; otherwise he would not answer for the consequences.

Gray, upon learning this, said at once that there was really no great reason for haste; he had come to look upon the girl as the very apple of his eye, and gladly would have gone through any danger to relieve her of the slightest care.

So it was arranged that they should remain for a week, at the least, in Omaha.

To Gray, who was coolness personified, the delay made no difference whatever. He was confident that he had completely checkmated the Owls by the march he had stolen upon them, and so his mind was utterly free from care.

But, with the girl it was different; on the very second day even she began to have anxious thoughts. Her dreams were bad; in the realms of sleep again she grappled in deadly fight with the crafty lawyers, and these visions filled her mind with a sense of impending danger. She bore it as well as she could, for some time, in silence, for, as she admitted to herself, she really had no reason to be alarmed; but Gray, who watched her increasing melancholy, at last succeeded in inducing her to reveal to him the cause.

"I suppose of course they are but the foolish fancies of a sick girl," she said, in conclusion, after she had related how much the visions of the night had disturbed her.

"Then you think that the Brevoorts are in chase of us?" queried her companion.

"Yes, I do; I know that I have no reason at all to think so, still I cannot get the idea out of my mind. It is firmly imprinted there."

"What do you advise doing? The doctor says, decidedly, that you must not attempt to go on until the middle of next week."

"But you can go."

"What! and leave you here all alone?"

"There is no danger; the people in the hotel are very kind to me."

"Yes; still I don't like it."

"It cannot be helped; the idea is strong in my mind that Jason Brevoort is following close behind us; possibly he has already passed us, thanks to this unlucky delay, and is even now in the Black Hills, eagerly endeavoring to find the leaden casket wherein the important papers are concealed."

"But he knows absolutely nothing of that casket."

"Are you sure of that? How can you be sure?" asked Alma, anxiously. "The secret may be known to others as well as to myself. Think what a terrible advantage it would give to the Brevoorts if they succeeded in getting those important papers into their hands. My

cause, in that event, I fear, would be utterly hopeless."

"But to go and leave you here all alone!"

"I shall be cheered by the knowledge that you are on the ground making a brave fight for me, while, if we both remain here, this dreadful anxiety will, I am sure, retard my recovery. Go, in Heaven's name! It needs more than a woman's weak arm to struggle with these desperate men in the wild region where all our hopes are centered."

"You are right, there, Miss Alma; the arm of the law has little weight in the canyon of the Spearfish. It is the old story over again; the strong arm and the right of night."

"If you are on the ground you can easily hold your own, but if you linger here, Jason Brevoort may be able to bear off the prize without opposition."

"Very well, I will go."

Much more than this Gray would have done for the sake of the orphan girl, whom he had learned to love so well, although he did not disguise from himself that it was a hopeless passion, and that he stood very little chance of winning the beautiful maiden, but, with that spirit of chivalry that in the old days impelled gallant knights to espouse the cause of the helpless and the forlorn, he went bravely on in the task which he had taken upon himself. He was determined the wrongs of the orphan girl should be redressed, and the rich spoils that the greedy Owls had clutched, torn from them and returned to the rightful owner.

So Gray set off at once for the Black Hills.

It was arranged between himself and Alma that she should write to him two or three days before she started to follow him, so that he could be on the look-out to receive her.

For once the peculiar instinct which so strongly appertains to womankind was entirely in the right.

The Brevoorts, thanks to the lucky chance which had revealed to them who and what the Australian song-bird, Lucia Romola, really was, knew Gray's plans and could follow on his trail as correctly as though they had had a hand in the forming of the scheme of operations.

The father and son had held a council in New York, and the result of their deliberations sent old Brevoort with the girl to Long Branch, while Jason hastened at once to the Black Hills.

The young Owl was no stranger to the Western wilderness, and from the knowledge which he possessed of the wild country, and the still wilder people, he nothing doubted but that he would be able to accomplish the task which lay before him.

A hundred times, as he rode behind the iron horse toward the far western land, he muttered:

"That casket and the papers which it contains must be mine, no matter how great the cost, whether it takes money or blood!"

At Omaha Jason happened to buy a paper to while away the wait necessary upon the transfer of passengers and baggage.

The young Owl was only a day behind the couple whom he pursued, and the enterprising local reporter of the Omaha daily had a full account of the railroad accident of the preceding day, and, among other items appertaining to the disaster, mentioned that a Mr. Gray and lady were stopping at such and such a hotel, the lady having received quite a shock.

Of course the moment he learned this, Jason determined to tarry for a time in Omaha. He secured an apartment right next door to the one occupied by the orphan girl. He drilled a hole through the wall, so as to be able to overhear any conversation that might take place between the two, for he reasoned that Gray and Alma would most certainly consult together in regard to their plans, and so it happened that Brevoort was as well posted as they were themselves, and when Gray started westward, the young Owl was on the same train, carefully disguised.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LOG TAVERN.

THE Little Montana mine on Spearfish creek was about as rich a strike as had been made in the Black Hills up to the time of which we write.

The Californian days of mining have passed away and the chances are that we shall never see them again, at any rate not in our time; in those days the solitary miner with the rudest of tools by a single lucky find often made a fortune; but in the Black Hills although there was pay-dust enough there in certain spots yet the ore required the use of machinery to reduce it, and to procure machinery money is necessary, and so mining can only be carried on by men or companies with capital at their back.

Old Dick Van Dyke was, luckily for him, "well-fixed," to use the common phrase, when he discovered the lode, which he had named the Little Montana, but he had hardly got the mine into good working order when death, the fell destroyer, stepped in and in his stern way called upon the veteran to "pass in his checks" and turn his attention to another world.

With the death of old Van Dyke came legal trouble. He had left a will behind him, all

duly executed and witnessed, bequeathing all he possessed to his niece, Alma, but there were certain papers missing which gave fraud a chance to show its head.

At the time of the discovery of the mine there were two other men associated with Van Dyke, but they did not share the veteran's belief in the richness of the newly-discovered lode and when they discovered that ten or fifteen thousand dollars would have to be spent, and perhaps more, before the mine would pay anything at all, they became discouraged and offered to sell out.

Van Dyke accepted the offer and paid the parties their own figure, so much in cash and so much on time, but after the death of the old man when it leaked out that some of his valuable private papers were missing, these parties, with that peculiar sharpness that is sometimes found in the stock-market and in mining operations, came forward and claimed that old Van Dyke had never settled their claims, and that the estate still owed them quite a large sum.

If these men had been paid they were pressing the claim in the hope that the acknowledgment of the satisfaction had been lost.

And, sure enough, the trustees in whose hands the property had been placed by old Van Dyke, were not able to find any proof that the claims had been paid, although they felt perfectly sure that they had been settled, for the mine had been making money for a year, and neither one of the two claimants were men to hide their light behind a bushel, and it was just as sure as anything could be that, if the two had had any just claim to the mine, they would surely have come forward and pressed that claim the moment the mine began to make money.

So the lawyers got hold of the mine, and it was quite evident that they would make something out of the Little Montana if no one else did.

The success of Van Dyke's enterprise led to other mines being located in the neighborhood, and nearly all did well, so that quite a little camp had sprung up around them.

The principal shanty in the camp was the hotel, or "Log Tavern," as it was termed, which was hotel, saloon, post-office and general store combined.

The proprietor of this establishment was a huge, broad-shouldered fellow, with rather an ill-looking face, Ben Hugan he called himself, and he was not particularly popular among the miners, being rather unsocial and morose in his demeanor.

The landlord was lounging in the doorway when the stage drove up; it was late in the afternoon and trade was not driving. In the mining-camps nearly all purchasing is done by night, as the men are hard at work during the day and women are few and far between.

The stage—it was nothing but a sorry two-horse hack of an old-fashioned pattern long since banished to the frontier—which served as the means of communication with the outer world, ran from Montana Bar, so the camp was named, to Deadwood, making two trips per week each way.

A solitary passenger dismounted from the stage, a roughly-dressed individual, clad in regular mining fashion and sadly needing shaving. Long locks of shaggy hair escaped from under the edges of the well-worn slouch-hat which he pulled down over his eyes, and as he passed into the tavern carelessly nodding to the landlord that worthy favored him with a piercing glance from under his bushy eyebrows, and any one taking particular notice of the look, would have imagined that the landlord recognized the traveler.

The driver of the stage took a cigar-box from under the seat and tossed it to the landlord.

"Yere's yer mail!" he exclaimed, and in this primitive fashion intelligence from the outer world reached Montana Bar.

The stage drove off, heading for the stable in the rear of the hotel, and the landlord entered the house, carrying the "mail" with him. He deposited the box on the bar of the saloon.

This was the post-office; any one who expected letters came in, examined the contents of the box, took his letters, if there were any, and on the other hand retreated with a "Cuss the luck; no mail ag'in!" if the expected letters had not arrived.

Not much privacy about this peculiar post-office, nor much safety, either, if any rascal had taken it into his head to possess himself of his neighbor's letters; but letters, valuable as they might be to the rightful owner, were hardly worth stealing.

The traveler had seated himself in a chair and was stretching out his legs in an extremely comfortable way.

"I say, landlord, have you got any good whisky?" he asked, as Hugan came in.

"Oh, yes; as good fire-water as you'll find in the Black Hills," the other responded.

"Well, set 'em up, and will you take a glass to our better acquaintance?"

"Oh, I reckon that we are well enough acquainted, if you are the man I take you for," the landlord replied, leaning on the counter and fixing a steady gaze on the new-comer.

"You recognize me, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, I did you at the first glance, but I thought that my get-up would bother you."

"I never forget a face, although I reckon that there wouldn't many be apt to recognize you, because you have changed a good deal."

"I suppose from seeing you here that there isn't much danger to be apprehended."

"Oh, no; the Bar has changed a good deal during the year that has gone by, since you and I used to figure here. Nearly all the old boys have got out and new men have come in. And then, you know, as far as I am concerned, in the old time I used to wear a full beard, and cutting that off changes my appearance wonderfully."

"What do you call yourself, now?"

"Ben Hugan."

"That's a good name, better than Black Bill, of the olden time," remarked the stranger, reflectively.

"And what is your real handle?"

"Jason Brevoort."

And, sure enough, it was the young Owl, although few would have recognized him, he had so altered his personal appearance, by donning the shaggy wig, allowing his beard to grow, and assuming the miner's rough garb.

"I take it that is your real handle, and no shenanigan," the host observed after quite a pause.

"Yes, it is—just that and nothing to pay."

"And what brings you to the Black Hills, again—after gold?"

"Yes, but not to dig it out of the earth. I leave that for bigger fools to do. I know an easier way than that."

"So do I; keeping a whisky-shop," remarked Hugan, with a grin.

"Well, Hugan, I'm glad that I met you, for you are the very man I want, for I've got work on hand that will pay both of us."

"I'm your man, but no old road-agent business this time, you know. I'm not going to risk my neck again for anybody. We had a tight squeeze to get off, before, and I've learned wisdom, if you haven't. Tain't a favorable time for anything of that kind, either, for that's been a good deal of robbery and such like devilment in this locality, and that has been pretty strong talk of the vigilantes rising for some time, and if the boys do once get started, I tell you they'll be apt to make things hum."

"Oh, don't be alarmed; it isn't anything of that sort," Jason replied. "I agree with you, the road-agent business is played out; it's big risk for little pay, but I've got an enterprise on hand, now, that will pay well, without much danger. Just look over that mail and see if there is a letter for Gilbert Gray."

"The superintendent of the Little Montana?"

"The same."

"There is," said the other, after examination, and he held the letter up.

"Hand it over!"

"But see here, Gray's up-stairs now!"

"Up-stairs."

"Yes, asleep."

"Is he a friend or enemy of yours?"

"Neither friend nor enemy."

"Well, then, join me against him and I'll pay you well."

"But I don't understand."

"Why, it's all about this Montana mine fight. I'm against the heir of old Van Dyke; Gray is for her. It's a girl—a young woman, and I'm going to flax them. That letter is from her to him; so hand it over so that I can get a glimpse of their game. If I succeed in beating them, which I am pretty sure to do, it will be a thousand dollars in your pocket."

The landlord hesitated no longer, but gave the letter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LETTER.

In a handsome lady's hand the letter was directed to Gilbert Gray, Esq., Superintendent of the Little Montana mine, Montana Bar, etc. It was inclosed in a common envelope, and bore the stamp of the Omaha post-office.

"This is the one that I expected," Jason remarked, as he carefully examined the missive.

"Gray has been on the look-out for it for two or three days now," the landlord observed.

"Oh, he shall have it!" the young Owl exclaimed. "He shall have it after I get through with it!"

"After you get through with it—why, what are you going to do with it?"

"I'll show you very soon. Have you got such a thing as a tea-kettle full of hot water in the shanty?"

"Yes, I reckon that there is in the kitchen," and the landlord nodded toward a door in the rear of the apartment.

Jason proceeded at once to the kitchen, followed by the landlord.

Sure enough, a kettle was steaming away on the stove.

Jason held the letter over the hot steam until the sealing of the envelope was affected and the flap unsealed, while the landlord, who was not up to this trick, gazed on in silent wonder.

"There, how is that for la!" the young

Owl remarked, as he drew the letter from the inclosure and proceeded to make himself master of the contents.

The letter was quite brief and read as follows:

"DEAR MR. GRAY:—The doctor says I will be able to travel in three days, so I shall then start for Montana Bar, and as I have reason to think that my enemies are on my track, possibly waiting for me in the mining camp, I think you had better not meet me in the village, but in Spearfish canyon. Take the new trail that leads to the canyon below the falls and wait for me there. I should arrive on the evening of the fifth day from the date of this letter, and if not on the fifth then surely on the sixth. I think it is better to visit the canyon by night rather than by day, so as to escape observation.

"Yours truly,

"ALMA VAN DYKE."

Brevoort read the letter aloud, while the landlord listened with open ears.

"On the evening of the fifth day," the young Owl observed. "That is to-night; I had no idea she was so close behind me."

"But she can't come to-day now; the stage is already in," the landlord remarked.

"Very true, but that doesn't make any difference; she will undoubtedly come by private conveyance, and she will in all probability try and arrange it so that she will enter the valley after nightfall, thinking to escape observation. It's funny how shrewd these women are in guessing. I have not made a single move by means of which she could get an idea that I am on her track, yet she suspects it; but now, let me see what I will do!"

Jason caressed his bearded chin in a thoughtful sort of way for a few minutes, while the other watched him in silence.

"I have it!" Jason exclaimed at last. "It's lucky that I've got my tools with me."

Then from a secret inner pocket he drew a little leather case which contained a couple of tiny vials. The potent liquid contained in one of the vials he applied to two words in the letter, "new" and "below," and as if by magic they faded out. Then with a pen he carefully wrote in "old" in place of new and "above" in place of below, so that the letter directed Gray to take the "old" trail and wait "above" the falls; and these two words the young Owl wrote in such exact imitation of the handwriting of Alma that it is extremely probable even the girl herself would have been reluctant to say she did not pen them.

Then in the most careful manner Jason resealed the letter and gave it to the landlord, who in wonder and admiration had watched the performance of this clever trick.

"There," the young lawyer said, "you can give that to Mr. Gray as soon as you please; and now I want a service at your hands. You say Gray is up-stairs, asleep?"

"Yes, sound as a log!"

"Well, will you go up-stairs and doctor his revolvers for me? Remove the caps; plug the nipples with a splinter and then replace the caps again. The trick won't be detected until he attempts to discharge them."

"But I don't understand!" exclaimed Hugan.

"My dear old pardner, you never were overburdened with brains," Jason replied, "but in this case I reckon it would take a wonderful man to guess my game. Not to keep you in suspense, though, since you are to act with me in this affair, I will explain: Gray will get this letter; it is all fair and above-board; nothing about it to excite suspicion. He is to meet the girl in the canyon—to take the old trail and wait for her above the falls. Old Dick Van Dyke before he died concealed a lead box, wherein he hid valuable papers, somewhere in the canyon of the Spearfish, and it is this leaden box that the girl, Alma, comes after. She knows the hiding-place, and she is the only one on this earth who does. It is concealed below the falls of course, for it is below the falls that she expects Gray to wait for her. Instead of Gray, you and I will be there; we can easily conceal ourselves among the rocks so that we can keep our eyes upon the girl and yet escape her observation; the moment she unearths the leaden casket you and I will step forward and wrest it from her."

"Oh! I see!" exclaimed Hugan, amazed at the cleverness of the plan. "And Gray on the rocks above will not be able to interfere in the game."

"Exactly, if his shooting-irons are doctored; I shall have the extreme pleasure of seizing the prize right before him, and he will not be able to interfere. You see, the fact is, Hugan, there is a love-affair going on between Gray and the girl, and he has kinder put my nose out of joint, for I wanted her myself, and as the thing stands I am willing to go to a good deal of trouble to get square. The moment I get my fingers on this lead box I hold all Alma's fortune at my mercy."

"It's a bully plan!" declared the landlord, earnestly.

"Are you in with me?"

"Yes, sir-ee, if I kin make a stake out of it."

"You can, and a big one, too."

"All right; I'm your man!"

"Go for the revolvers then; that is the first thing on the programme."

"I'll fix 'em inside of ten minutes; you wait here!"

The landlord departed and the young Owl sat down by the fire to ruminate. The meeting with his "pardner" of the old time road-agent days was indeed a rare stroke of luck; for surly Black Ben was a faithful tool and could be fully depended upon in the hour of danger.

Within ten minutes, sure enough, the landlord returned, a broad grin upon his dark face.

"All right, old feller! I've fixed 'em jest splendid—plugged every nipple; them revolvers now ain't any more use to him than so many junks of lead; the only way he kin damage a feller with 'em would be to throw 'em at him."

"The first move, then is a success; and now, since I'm likely to have a night job of it, is there any bunk in the house that you can give me so that I can get a few winks of sleep?" Jason asked.

"Oh, yes; you kin have my own bed."

"All right, and you keep watch for the girl; although I have an idea that she will not enter the town until after dark, and then merely pass through it without stopping and head for the canyon at once."

"I'll keep my eyes open, anyway," the landlord replied, and then he conducted Jason to a sleeping room up-stairs. "Thar; you'll be all right in hyer," Hugan said, as he showed the young Owl into the room. "I'll call you at six, eh?"

"Yes, that will do."

Jason threw himself on the bed and Hugan withdrew.

The landlord rubbed his hands gleefully together as he descended the stairs. The unexpected arrival of the man who was once the bold road-agent captain, the terror of the Deadwood district, seemed to promise a rich harvest in the future.

"Mighty sight better than keeping this hyer tavern," Hugan muttered, as he reentered the lower apartment, "if he don't get too risky and play too bold a game as he did afore. That's the trouble with him; he risks too much, and that is what 'n' sted him all to smash in the old time, 'n' mighty near cost him his neck, too. I reckon, though, that he has learnt wisdom now."

The arrival of a coach—an extra—suddenly interrupted the landlord's meditations.

The coach drew up at the door of the Log Tavern and a lady descended.

"By hookey! if it ain't the gal!" Hugan exclaimed.

The lady, who was both young and pretty, came at once into the house.

"Aro you the landlord?" she demanded.

"Yes, marm."

"Is Mr. Gilbert Gray stopping here? If so, I want to see him immediately."

"All right, marm; jest sit down and I'll call him at once," Hugan replied.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN EXPLANATION.

THE landlord departed on his mission and the lady, seating herself by the rude table, looked around her in astonishment.

"Well, the longer you live the more you know, they say," she murmured, "and as far as I am concerned, I certainly have learned a great deal in the last few weeks. This is really a horrid place. The further you go the worse you fare in this country. Omaha was quite different from New York; Deadwood was far worse than Omaha, and this place isn't near as civilized as Deadwood; and, as for these dreadful stage coaches! I never want to see another coach, much less ride in one, as long as I live. They are not half as nice as common cars; they go bumpity-bump. First you hold on to your seat, and then you smash your hat against the roof! It is perfectly awful, so it is!"

And the lady took another look around her and turned up her nose in disgust.

"And they call this wretched shanty a hotel!" she exclaimed, in profound contempt. "No wonder that such a miserable settlement is called a 'camp,' and not a town. It is really a mystery to me how such a gentleman as Mr. Gray can manage to exist in such a horrid, ugly place."

The appearance of the man of whom she had just spoken interrupted her meditations.

The lady rose at once to receive him with outstretched hand, but the superintendent of the Little Montana, although he had been informed by the landlord that a lady wished to see him, appeared to be much surprised.

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Gray?" she asked, evidently annoyed by the manner of the gentleman.

"Oh, yes, miss; I remember you very well indeed," Gray hastened to say, and as he spoke he advanced and took the outstretched hand. "But, you see, you were the very last person in the world that I expected to see, and I don't think I was ever much more astonished in my life than when I caught sight of your face."

"You did not expect to see me, Alma Van Dyke, out in this wild region?"

"I beg your pardon, miss!" Gray returned, immediately, "the Alma Van Dyke of Saratoga, but not the Alma Van Dyke that I knew a year or so ago in New York."

And in truth the girl was not the true Alma but the false one, and as Gray, when he had been informed by Hugan that a lady was waiting to see him down stairs, had at once hurried below, expecting to see her for whose sake he had braved the power of the Owls, no wonder he was surprised upon beholding the other.

"Mr. Gray, that is exactly the reason that brought me all the way from New York to this desolate region!" the girl announced, with an energy that seemed entirely foreign to her nature. "I know that there is another Alma living, although I did not know it when I met you at Saratoga. I know, now, the other Alma claims that she is the true Alma and that I am the false one. The Brevoorts finding that I had heard something of the matter made a virtue of necessity and told me their version of the story."

"And according to their version," Gray observed, "you are the true Alma and this other girl is an impostor, seeking to derive you of the fortune which rightly belongs to you."

"Yes; is it the truth?"

Gray hesitated to answer; it seemed terribly hard at a single blow to strip away the falsehood and hurl her from the proud position where the cunning artifice of the two lawyers had placed her.

"Mr. Gray, you will tell me the truth, I know you will!" the girl exclaimed, imploringly. "I have faith in you and I have no faith in the men who say that they are my friends, and that they are actuated solely by a desire to protect my interests. They told me the whole story—their story: you are an adventurer who is championing the cause of this girl who claims to be the true Alma solely to rob me of the fortune which my father left me in order that you and she may enjoy it. This is their tale; I ought to believe it, and yet I do not; so I have traveled all the way to the Black Hills expressly to find you, in order that I may learn the truth. If I am not Alma I do not wish to touch a single penny of Alma's money. I may be a fool—ever since I was a little girl everybody has always said that I hadn't any brains; but if I am a fool I am not a thief, and I don't want any money that does not belong to me."

Gray had listened attentively to the passionate declaration, and his respect for the girl increased as he gathered the sense of her statement.

"Miss, your sentiments do you honor," he said, slowly, "and if I could only redress the wrong that the true Alma has suffered without injuring you, I should be only too happy. It is not against you that I wage war, but against the Brevoorts, who are both cruel and merciless. You shall have the best possible proof that Alma is Alma, and that you are Agnes; letters in your father's own handwriting wherein he describes both his children, and so carefully describes them that a mistake is impossible. Of course the Brevoorts are lawyers and they will make as tough a fight as possible; that is to be expected. For quite a time now they have had full control of this magnificent estate, and have profited greatly out of it, too, and, naturally, are reluctant to give it up. Even with the proofs in our hands they will make a desperate struggle, for the old man is crafty and the young one desperate."

"There is but one now," the girl said.

"But one?"

"Yes; old Mr. Brevoort is dead."

"Is it possible?" Gray cried, amazed at the intelligence.

"Yes, he died very suddenly, just five days ago; an attack of apoplexy the doctors said. I was all alone with him in the house, the servants excepted. Jason was away, and no one knew where he had gone, and so I determined to come to the Black Hills myself and see you. I was well provided with money. I believed that you would tell me the truth, for, though the Brevoorts say that you are my enemy, yet I do not believe them."

Gray was deeply affected by the blunt and honest speech of the girl, and she had taken, too, such an unusual step that for a moment he was puzzled how to answer her.

"Miss, it is not true that I am your enemy, although acting in the interests of justice I am obliged to declare that you are not the true Alma Van Dyke."

"I know all the circumstances!" the girl hastened to say. "Mr. Brevoort told me the story—the ridiculous lie, as he termed it; and yet all the time that he was speaking I felt sure that the story was grossly perverted as to the real facts."

"Indeed it is, miss!" Gray exclaimed. "The true story is soon told. Alma's father—your father also—left her a very large fortune, a million of dollars. The Brevoorts were his trusted men of business and to their care he left the handling of the estate. They speculated rashly and foolishly, and, large as the sum was, it was all swallowed up in Wall street. Alma came from England, her education finished, to enter upon the enjoyment of her property. The Brevoorts were thus placed in a perilous situation, and desperate means had to be resorted to; they could not give the heiress the money

which they had lost, and they knew that an explosion was at hand that would be utter ruin to them, so they determined to sacrifice the girl, as, by the sacrifice, they also reestablished themselves, for they had insured her life for a princely sum. The fiendish plan was fully carried out in all its details and apparently succeeded, but before they could claim the life-insurance money the news reached them of the death of the miner, Dick Van Dyke, Alma's uncle, and that the girl, by his death, had come in for another million. Of course then they saw that they had worked for naught; the living girl was worth to them much more than the dead one. Then they planned the trick which substituted you for the dead girl, for dead of course they fully believed her to be."

"Yes, yes; I am convinced that you speak the truth!"

"I don't ask you to believe me without proof!" Gray added; "I expect Alma every day, and as soon as she arrives I can place in your hands these letters of your father to which I referred, and I am sure that you will not doubt their evidence."

"Alma is coming here, then?"

"Yes; perhaps this last mail brought a letter from her; I have not examined it yet." And going to the extremely primitive "post office," the cigar-box on the bar of the saloon he looked over the letters.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon the letter which the young Owl had so cleverly "doctored."

He opened it and read the contents aloud, while the girl listened eagerly.

"She will probably be here to-night," Gray remarked, after he had concluded the letter. "I will be on the look-out for her. You had better remain here. I will speak to the landlord and see that you are made comfortable. I have some business at the mine to attend to, at six, and then I will go at once to the canyon."

Gray proceeded to make good his word. The landlord promised to take the best possible care of the young lady, and the superintendent, satisfied, departed.

Big Ben showed the young girl to a room and immediately roused Brevoort from his slumbers, but when Jason succeeded in getting a sly look at the lady, to the landlord's astonishment he informed him that it was not the one he expected.

"This is my 'heiress!'" he announced, dropping into the slang of the frontier.

"Well, hyer's the other one, anyway!" Hugan exclaimed, catching sight of a lady in a stage at the door of the tavern.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TWO ALMAS.

The landlord was right this time; the newcomer was indeed Alma.

"Two on 'em! Will they be apt to fight if they see each other?" Big Ben inquired, jocosely.

"Well, I don't know, and that is exactly what I desire to find out," Brevoort replied. "I don't understand why my damsel came here at all, and the sooner I find out how she is affected in regard to us the better. The partition walls are thin, and any conversation in the rooms can be overheard in the entry, unless the parties are extremely careful, which these two are not likely to be. Just make a mistake, Ben, and show this new one into the room occupied by the other, and then get out as soon as you can. I'll listen in the entry here, and the chances are about a hundred to one that I shall hear something which it will be to my advantage to know."

"Sartin! it looks like it!" and with this observation the landlord departed.

The lady was just entering the door when Hugan came into the saloon.

"Are you the landlord?" she asked.

"Yes, miss," responded Big Ben, endeavoring to smooth out his rough face and appear as civilized as possible.

"Mr. Gilbert Gray is stopping here, I believe?"

"The superintendent of the Little Montana works, miss?"

"Yes, that is the gentleman I wish to see."

"I reckon, miss, that you are the lady that he has been expecting for the last few days."

"Yes, I am."

"Well, he's jest gone out, but he won't be long, and if you like I'll show you up to a room so that you can rest yourself while I send a messenger after him."

"I shall be very much obliged if you will be so kind."

"Oh, it's no trouble, miss; Mr. Gray is a friend of mine, and I would do a heap sight more than that to oblige him," the landlord declared, with an expression of great earnestness.

It was no wonder that Alma yielded ready belief to the words of Hugan, for she had no reason to look upon him with suspicion, so she followed him without question.

The landlord conducted her to the second floor, and then pointing down the narrow entry, said.

"Just go in that second door and I will send

a messenger for Mr. Gray, and have him here in a brace of shakes."

"Thank you; you are very kind," the girl replied, and then, carrying out the landlord's instructions, she entered the room, the door of which he had pointed out.

Within the apartment she found herself face to face with the other Alma.

The recognition was mutual, for the false Alma had been informed by the Brevoorts that it was the Saratoga belle, known as the Australian song bird, Lucia Romola, who claimed to be the true Alma.

It would be hard to say which was the more astonished of the two, for neither of the girls had any idea that the other was within a thousand miles, although Gray had spoken of Alma's coming.

Alma, of course, was not aware that the other knew who she really was, and thinking that she had mistaken the landlord's directions and entered the wrong door, prepared to retreat.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "I perceive that I have made a mistake, but I did not know the room was occupied. Excuse me, please!"

But before Alma could move, Agnes—for in future we will give the false Alma her true name—sprung to her feet; she had been sitting by the window looking out into the street.

"Do not go away!" she exclaimed, hurriedly; "you are the very person that I wish to see, for, if I mistake not, you are Alma Van Dyke!"

"And if I mistake not that is what you also claim to be your name," Alma replied. She saw that the other was resolved upon an explanation, and she did not shrink from it, although in her heart she did not feel well-disposed toward this girl who had so boldly stepped forward to take her place in the world.

"No, no!" Agnes exclaimed, quickly; "you are wrong there. I do not claim that my name is Alma Van Dyke. I was always called Agnes Percival, until only a short time ago, when Mr. Brevoort came to England after me and informed me that I had been the victim of a horrid plot—that my true name was Alma Van Dyke, and that I was the heiress of a million."

"And you believe him?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Agnes demanded, innocently. "What did I know about the matter except what I had been told? And now, Alma, sister, for you are my sister, you know, ask yourself, if you had been placed in my situation, wouldn't you have been apt to do exactly as I have done? If some one had come to you and said: 'You have been wronged out of a fortune; your name is so and so; I have all the papers to prove it, and there is a million of dollars waiting for you,' wouldn't you have fairly jumped at the chance?"

"I have no doubt that I would," Alma admitted.

"Particularly if you had been brought up all your life half-starved as I was. Why, it seemed all just like a dream to me. Hero was I, poor as a church-mouse, with only just a little bit of an income—just money enough to live on, and that was all; and with no visible way of bettering myself, either, for I never was clever; I couldn't become a vocalist, as you did, and make a living for myself; I always was stupid; I was born so and I can't help it. But, if I haven't got brains, Alma, I've got a heart, and a conscience, and I mean to do exactly what is right. If I am not Alma Van Dyke—and I am beginning to believe that I am not—I don't want Alma Van Dyke's money. I'm not going to be anybody's cat's-paw to pull chestnuts out of the fire! Anybody that buys me for a fool will probably get a bargain, but I am not a rascal in petticoats, and this Jason Brevoort will find it out, too, before he is much older."

"Where is Jason Brevoort?"

"I don't know; I haven't seen him for some time."

"Oh, he is not with you then?"

"No, of course not; I came all alone, all by myself. I came after Mr. Gray."

This innocent declaration sent a sharp pain through the heart of the listener; why should she seek Mr. Gray? Alma was determined to learn at once.

"You came to see Mr. Gray—I do not understand. What do you want with him? You are not in love with Gilbert Gray?"

Agnes opened her sleepy blue eyes wide in astonishment.

"In love with Mr. Gray!" she exclaimed. "Oh, dear, no! I wish I was! It would be too awfully jolly, for I think that he is just a splendid fellow!"

"He is a noble man, and the best and truest friend that I have in all this wide world?" Alma confessed. "But for his aid, I should not now be living to battle with the men who struck at my life that they might cover up the crime of robbing me of my estate. I was alone and helpless—not a single friend, and he aided me."

"It is no wonder that you love him, then," Agnes remarked, much to the other's confusion.

"Oh, no; I did not say that!" Alma hastened to declare.

"But, you do love him, you know you do," Agnes persisted. "And he loves you, too: I know that he does; I can tell from the manner in which he spoke of you. Ah! everything goes

well with you and everything goes wrong with me. You are rich, with a noble man who adores you and is willing to do anything for your sake, while I am all alone in the world, no money and no friends."

"Agnes, you shall never lack a friend while I live!" Alma exclaimed, fervently, advancing to her side and embracing her. "As you yourself said, only a moment ago, we are sisters; the tie of blood binds us together, although the malice of designing men brought us in opposition to each other; but, now that we have come to an understanding, we can defy the arts of this crafty lawyer. I shall have money enough for both if I succeed in the enterprise which I have in view. Before this very night ends I shall hold in my hands legal papers which will prove to the satisfaction of any court in the land that this great mining property is mine."

"Yes, I know; I saw Mr. Gray only a little while ago and he told me that he expected you to-night. You see, Alma, as big an idiot as I am, I suspected that the Brevoorts were using me for a cat's-paw, and so I journeyed all the way to the Black Hills to ask Mr. Gray to tell me the truth about the matter. I had faith in him although the Brevoorts did denounce him as an adventurer. Mr. Gray has gone to the mine."

"So the landlord told me, and he has sent a messenger after him."

"Well, if he does not find him, he will be in waiting for you to-night, for he told me that he would take the old trail and wait for you in the canyon above the falls."

"He has made a mistake!" Alma exclaimed, instantly. "It is not the old trail, but the new one that he is to take, and that leads below the falls instead of above."

"Well, he said the old trail and above the falls," Agnes persisted. "I haven't made any mistake about the matter if he has; but I don't see how he could be mistaken for he read the directions right from your letter."

"But I am positive that I wrote the new trail and below the falls."

"Oh, there's a mistake somewhere, I suppose," Agnes admitted; "but I'm quite sure that I am right."

"It doesn't matter, for Mr. Gray will probably be here very soon."

The conversation between the two after this was of little importance and we will not transcribe it, but go at once to the two listeners, the landlord and Jason Brevoort in the entry.

"The gal has weakened on you," Hugan observed.

"Yes, but it's the way with all women; you never can depend upon them, when their sentiment gets roused; but I'll play trumps this night in spite of them!"

In due time the landlord informed Alma that his messenger had not been able to find Gray, but that he had left word for him.

The girl was forced to be content with this although she had a presentiment of evil.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE CANYON.

AFTER supper Alma sent for the landlord. She had reflected earnestly upon the matter and had concluded to trust to the landlord to procure a guide, as Gray had not returned. She was resolved to visit the canyon and secure the precious leaden casket that very night.

Although she had an apprehension of evil, yet Agnes's assurance that Jason Brevoort was not with her tranquilized her mind, in a measure.

She had to trust some one, and wherefore not the landlord as well as any other stranger? He was just as likely to be honest as any one whom she would be apt to meet.

Agnes, when she learned of Alma's design, begged to accompany her, but Alma would not consent.

"No, no!" she said; "if there is any peril in the enterprise, then it is my right to face it alone. I will not consent to your going."

And as Alma was firm, Agnes was obliged to be content, although she protested vigorously against it.

When the landlord came Alma explained her wish to him.

Hugan answered at once that he knew every foot of the canyon of the Spearfish, and that if the lady had no objection he himself would go with her; and he further added that he accounted for Mr. Gray's non-appearance on the theory that the superintendent had been called away by some business that would not bear delay.

The night was a favorable one for such an enterprise as the girl had in view, for there was a bright full moon which illuminated the earth as well almost as the sun by day.

"How soon do you want to start, miss?" Hugan asked, after all the particulars of the expedition were settled.

"Immediately!" Alma replied.

"All right! I'll be ready inside of ten minutes," the landlord declared, withdrawing from the apartment.

"Are you not afraid to trust yourself alone with this man?" Agnes very naturally asked, after the last had departed.

"No," Alma calmly replied.

"Well, I declare, if you ain't a regular hero in petticoats!" Agnes cried, in admiration. "I know that I should be frightened to death, for this landlord looks dreadfully like a cutthroat."

"You cannot always judge of men by their looks," the other answered. "All men in this wild Western land are more or less rough in their appearance; the restraints of civilization do not hamper them here."

"Yes; and white shirts, neckties and collars are almost unknown."

"Besides, I am not utterly friendless!" Alma remarked, with a quiet, confident smile.

"Yes, I know; Mr. Gray; but he will not be with you."

"Not Mr. Gray, but a friend equally true and who never deserts me."

Agnes looked amazed, and Alma, not to keep her in suspense, drew a fair-sized six-shooter from her pocket.

Agnes gave a little scream as her eyes fell upon the pistol.

"Goodness me! a revolver!" she exclaimed; "but, Alma, dear, you would never dare to use it, you know."

"Oh, yes, I would!" And the firm look upon the face of the girl seemed to indicate that she would be as good as her word.

"But you wouldn't know how!" Agnes persisted, for she had all the natural terror of her sex in regard to firearms.

"Oh, yes, I know how to use it well enough; I have carried this weapon for nearly a year, and during that time I have practiced constantly with it, so that I not only know how to handle it but I am also a very good shot."

"But, Alma; goodness! you wouldn't shoot any one, would you?"

"To protect myself I would, so help me Heaven!" Alma answered, firmly. "Nor should I count it a crime, either. These base wretches who have so wantonly assailed me, attacking not only my fortune but even my very life, have in a measure unsexed me, and made me bold and manlike. I am not afraid as long as I carry this weapon, of danger, for I feel sure that I can protect myself."

Well would it have been for the plotters if they could have overheard these words, for then they could have taken measures to provide against a danger, the existence of which they did not even suspect.

But the landlord and the young Owl were busy in council, for Hugan had gone at once to Brevoort to tell him of the purpose of the girl, and Jason had rubbed his hands gleefully upon hearing the news.

"Good, good!" he cried. "She walks into the snare of her own free will! Everything is working as well as possible. I will go on ahead and secrete myself behind some angle in the rocks; you will follow with the girl!"

"She will probably request me to stay behind when we come to the entrance to the canyon," Hugan interposed.

"Very well; you must do as she bids you, but hold yourself in readiness to come forward the moment you hear me call. I shall keep myself concealed until she has unearthed the casket and then reappears."

"It's a bully plan, and you'll pay me well for my share?"

"You shall have enough to make you rich for all the rest of your life if everything goes well!" Jason declared.

The landlord was satisfied with the assurance.

"And now, go at once and tell the girl that you are ready, and I'll start on ahead. By the way, what reason did she give for wishing to visit the canyon at such an hour as she has chosen?"

"She said that she had some particular business there, that was all, and I thought that I had better not sneer her by asking any questions."

"That was right; but be off with you!"

Hugan went up-stairs and Brevoort passed into the street, his face joyful and every nerve in his body tingling with excitement, for the moment of final triumph seemed near at hand. Once let him get his fingers on the precious papers contained in the leaden box, Alma would be forced to come to terms despite of a thousand Gilbert Grays.

Jason took his way at once to the canyon; he was well acquainted with the path for he had traversed it a hundred times, for Jason Brevoort and Montana Bar were no strangers to each other, although the mining-camp had never known him by his own proper name.

The moon being right overhead shone down right into the canyon, and Brevoort, to his annoyance, could find no place of concealment until he came to the upper end, but there he found plenty of hiding places.

"Perhaps it is better, after all," he mused, as he surveyed the giant boulders. "The chances are that the box is hidden among these very rocks, and if Gray should happen to arrive at the scene of action he cannot come any further than the point of yonder high rock if he takes the upper trail," and Jason glared across the canyon to where the upper trail wound along the crevices of the rocks. "It's a good fifty feet

leap down, and I reckon that even bold Mr. Gray will think twice before he tries that, unless he has the wings of a bird or the legs and horns of a Rocky Mountain sheep."

Brevoort found a hiding place that suited him behind two boulders, which were close enough together to screen him, and yet far enough apart so that he could look between them and command a view of all that went on in the canyon.

"Now, then, my dainty Alma: come on as soon as you like!" he exclaimed, as he sat down upon a convenient rock. "If everything goes as I think it will, within the next hour you will be glad to become my wife or else buy me off by the sacrifice of about everything that you have in this world!"

Indeed so carefully had Brevoort planned, that success did seem almost certain.

Some thirty minutes after Brevoort concealed himself behind the rocks, the landlord and Alma came to the entrance to the canyon.

Alma halted and looked down into the gloomy defile.

"Is this the place?" she asked.

"Yes, miss."

She looked around her eagerly; she had expected to find Gray waiting for her, but no such welcome sight met her eyes. She was disappointed, for she had confidently counted upon meeting Gray; but, now that she had arrived at the spot, there was nothing to do but to go on, even in Gray's absence.

Looking down into the canyon, the smooth walls rising sheer toward the heavens, Alma could not recognize the spot she sought.

"Is there not some place in the canyon where there is a large collection of big rocks heaped together?" she asked.

"Big boulders?"

"Yes, I believe that is what they are called."

"That's up at the other end."

"Is it far?"

"Not very; you can't see them from here, you know, because the canyon bends a little to the right, about half-way through, and the angle hides them."

"Will you wait here for me? I will not be long."

"Martin, miss; don't be in a hurry, you know; take your own time. I don't object to waiting as long as you like."

"Thank you," Alma replied, and then she walked boldly forward into the canyon.

"She's a plucky little gal!" Hagan muttered, "and I'm sorry that I'm obliged to lead her into such a trap, but such things will happen in this hyer life."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LEADEN CASKET.

ALMA walked straight on with firm and resolute steps, despite the natural feeling of alarm that the place and the hour inspired in her breast.

The absence of Gray, too, perplexed her. She could not understand it; he received her letter safely, for Agnes said that he read the contents to her, but was there really a mistake about the directions? Had she directed him to take the upper trail, or had she written the directions so indistinctly that her meaning had not been clearly revealed to him?

She was puzzled—in truth alarmed—apprehensive of danger, yet she kept straight on, as determined as though she had an army at her back.

Underneath the cloak she wore her right hand clutched the revolver; she was prepared for danger.

She reached the spot at last, where the boulders were scattered around, and she recognized the place the moment she saw it; old Dick Van Dyke had described the spot so carefully that a mistake was impossible.

The directions regarding the hiding-place of the treasure were imprinted as firmly in Alma's mind as though from early childhood she had learned nothing else.

Just a moment she hesitated and looked around her, then:

"Find the spot where three boulders stand together in a direct line," she repeated, thus putting into words the written lines of her uncle. "There are the three boulders," and the girl with outstretched finger pointed to the very boulders behind which Jason Brevoort was concealed; but, never dreaming that any one was concealed within the canyon, she did not look close enough to discover the man crouching behind the rocks.

"Turn your back directly on the boulders and go twenty common paces, say about forty feet, toward the other wall of the canyon."

As she spoke Alma performed the movement, and Brevoort, in his anxiety to see exactly what she was doing, rose from his skulking position and peered over the top of the boulders.

At the spot where Alma had halted was another collection of rocks; no big ones, though, but all small.

"Five flat rocks lying together, one in the center and four around it answering to the four points of the compass," the girl murmured, sinking her voice, much to the disgust of Bre-

voort, who was straining all his powers to overhear what she was saying.

"Under the center rock, concealed under about six inches of dirt, the leaden box lies hidden."

At last the hour of triumph seemed near; before the girl, right at her feet, the five stones lay; she had but to stoop, overturn the stone, remove the loose earth beneath, and the important papers, which proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that she was the true heir to the oil miner, and, too, that no living man had any just claim to the Little Montana property, were securely hers.

And at this supreme moment, just as she was about to stoop to unearth the treasure, some sudden instinct or impulse impelled her to turn her head and look around her.

So quick the movement—so entirely unexpected by Jason Brevoort that he had no time to seek concealment behind the boulders which had sheltered him so well before.

No, he had no time to make the slightest motion before the eyes of the girl rested upon him.

It was quite an exciting tableau, and the two stood and glared at each other for a moment with staring eyes.

Brevoort was the first to break the silence.

He lifted his hat, and, with sarcastic courtesy, cried:

"Good-evening, Miss Van Dyke! Allow me to have the pleasure of welcoming you to the Black Hills!"

Just two words escaped from the lips of the girl, who seemed almost paralyzed by the unexpected appearance of her foe.

"Jason Brevoort!" she murmured, between white lips.

"Yes, Miss Van Dyke, Jason Brevoort, and entirely at your service!" he replied, in an insolent way that entirely belied his words, and as he spoke he stepped from behind the rocks.

The bright beams of the pale moon shone down plainly upon his person as he stood, reckless and defiant, and grazed with an air of triumph upon the girl. She saw the brutal smile which only too plainly revealed that he considered her utterly helpless in his power; she noticed his rough costume, the revolvers in his belt and the long-bladed knife by his side upon whose naked blade the moonbeams shone.

For a moment a sickening sensation of fear came over the girl as she realized that she was all alone in the canyon with this cruel devil—alone without friend to cheer or aid her.

But, at this terrible moment, just as the girl's very senses seemed to reel, and the solid rocks around began to dance like so many grim, gray phantoms, her hand clutched the butt of the revolver concealed within her dress and the contact instantly inspired her with new courage.

Here at least was a single friend who could be depended upon not to fail her in this her hour of need.

The terrible sensation of fear fled, as if by magic, and in its place came iron resolution—the vigor of despair.

Brevoort noted the deathlike pallor of her countenance and laughed quietly in triumph. How utterly helpless the girl was, and how fully in his power!

"This is really an unexpected pleasure," he continued; "perhaps not so entirely unexpected to me as to you, for I've no doubt that when you entered the canyon you hadn't any idea I was within a thousand miles of you, eh, my dear Alma?"

"I did not expect to see you," the girl answered, mechanically enough, too, for her mind was not on her words, nor on his; she was looking forward to the terrible scene when he would advance and she would fire. Already in anticipation she beheld him lying, bleeding—lifeless at her feet, and although even in imagination the sight was a horrid one, enough to chill one's blood with terror, yet the girl had firmly and resolutely determined upon the deed.

"And you are delighted!" Brevoort exclaimed, with a cruel sneer. "I can see that you are overjoyed at the unexpected pleasure by the expression upon your face; and the pleasure is mutual, I assure you, Miss Alma; I can truthfully say that I never was better pleased to meet any one, in all my life."

Like the cat playing with its victim, the young Owl, sure of his triumph, was torturing his prey.

"There is only one thing I regret," he added, "and that is that our dear friend—our mutual friend, if I may be allowed to use the term—honest, romantic Gilbert Gray is not here to enjoy the pleasure of the scene. But, one thing comforts me, and that is the probability that our esteemed friend will arrive before we get through with our interview."

"Gilbert Gray coming!" the girl cried, and her heart gave a great leap for joy, although common sense should have told her that if there had been any danger of her champion arriving in time to be of service to her, Brevoort would have been the last man in the world to have made known the fact to her.

"Oh, yes; he will be here pretty soon, I think; not really here in the canyon, though, but up above there on the rocks. You see, my dear

Miss Van Dyke, I took the liberty of intercepting the letter that you wrote to Mr. Gray from Omaha, and I changed the directions that you gave him slightly. Instead of the lower new trail I put the upper one, the old instead of the new; and so, when he arrives, the nearest he can get to you will be the point of the rock yonder, fifty feet above you where the old trail winds along the edge of the cliff. He will be able to see—overbear all that passes between you and I, but will be as powerless to interfere as though he were a hundred miles away."

The heart of Alma sank within her as this disclosure fully revealed how desperate and determined was her foe.

But, she still had one protector that, even the skill of this fiend in man's guise would not be able to render powerless, the trusty revolver now clutched so firmly in her little right hand.

"And now, my dear Alma," continued Jason, advancing three or four steps nearer to her, "now that I have revealed my hand so plainly to you, I trust that you will be equally frank and not put me to any unnecessary or disagreeable trouble. I know exactly what brings you to this canyon, and will be very much obliged if you will point out where the article is concealed without delay."

"Where what is concealed?" the girl demanded. She could hardly bring herself to believe that Jason did really possess the knowledge to which he laid claim.

"What an incredulous mortal you are!" he retorted, in contempt. "You don't believe me then—you don't believe that I know your plans fully as well as you know them yourself; but I do, as you will soon discover. It is the leaden casket, my dear, that I am after—the leaden casket, in which your extremely eccentric uncle, old Dick Van Dyke, concealed his precious papers. Those papers not only free the Little Montana mine from the claim that is now made against it, but also prove that you are in reality the heiress of Dick Van Dyke. There, now, do you doubt my knowledge?"

The girl was fairly astounded, for she had no idea that Brevoort could be so well informed.

For a moment Jason enjoyed the look of dismay that appeared upon the pallid face of the girl; and then, beginning to weary of the sport of tormenting his victim, came at once to the point.

"Come! We're losing time!" he exclaimed, abruptly; "point out to me the spot where the casket is hidden. I will do the fair thing by you. You are utterly helpless in my power; your fortune, all, is at my mercy; but I am willing to make a bargain. Although you think that I am your foe, and I will frankly own that circumstances have made me act against you, yet, in reality, I am over head and ears in love with you, and even now, when I have succeeded in all my schemes, and you stand no chance at all, I am willing—anxious to marry you. Become mine, Alma, and in the future I will fight as hard for you as in the past I have fought against you."

"Your wife! I would rather die!" Alma exclaimed.

And just at that moment Gilbert Gray appeared above, light up on the cliff.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CUNNING TRICK.

BREVOORT took in the situation at a glance; it was exactly as he had wished; here was Gilbert Gray in person to witness his triumph; more he could not desire.

But, as for Alma, the appearance of Gray, although he was high on the cliff above her head, seemed at once to free her from all peril.

And Gray himself, although he saw that in some way there had been a mistake and that he should have taken the other road, yet as he was within easy pistol-shot of the two below in the canyon, and knew too that he was a master of the revolver, he nothing doubted that he could be able to baffle the desperate attempt of the lawyer.

"Oho! are you there, Mister Gilbert Gray?" Jason exclaimed, in jeering tones.

"Yes, just in time to square accounts with you!" Gray answered, deliberately drawing one of his revolvers from the holster and raising the hammer.

The glistening caps on the cylinder seemed to say that the weapon was loaded, charged and ready, so carefully had the lively lawman concealed the trick which he had played.

"Oh, no!" Brevoort exclaimed, "you're just in time to witness my triumph, and though you are almost within reach of us, yet you are powerless to interfere with my designs as though you were a thousand miles away!"

A look of astonishment appeared upon the faces of both Gray and the lawyer.

This burst seemed but the wild words of a man rendered desperate at seeing his prey snatched from his grip, even in the very hour of triumph.

"Dare to approach that lady and I'll quickly show you that you are in error!" Gray exclaimed.

"You will fire at me if I approach her!" Jason cried.

"I will, and not only fire at you but hit you too!"

"If you can!" Jason sneered.

"If I can't drill a hole through you I'll never fire a revolver again."

"Then you never will," the other retorted, "for you can no more hit me than your ball could cut down an eagle on the wing, a mile above your head. In this game so far I have beaten you at every point. If it had not been for a cunning trick of mine you would have been down here in this canyon now, instead of up there on the rock. I have explained the whole situation to my dear Miss Van Dyke here, and I rather think by this time she understands that when anybody sets out to measure wits with a man about the size of your humble servant, he will have to get up very early in the morning. I am in sober earnest, in this affair, and I mean business, every time. This lady knows where the leaden box of old Dick Van Dyke is concealed, and I mean to have that box or life instead!" and as he finished the speech he unsheathed the broad-bladed bowie-knife which he wore at his side and held it up so that the moonbeams danced playfully upon the surface of the shining steel.

And at the same time he gave utterance to a shrill whistle; it was the signal for the big tavern-keeper to join him, and burly Ben came quickly up the canyon.

The moment that the tavern-keeper appeared Alma at once saw how skillfully the trap had been planned into which she had fallen, but Gray's presence gave her confidence; and then, too, within the folds of the cloak which she wore her fingers grasped the handle of the six-shooter, and woman though she was, she felt that she had the courage to use it, if matters came to the last extremity.

"Now then, Miss Van Dyke!" exclaimed Brevoort, as Hugan came up to him, "I don't want to be ugly with you, and I hope that you won't give me cause to be, but I am a desperate man and I am determined to win in this game, even at the cost of blood. Reveal where this casket is concealed and upon my soul I will do the fair thing by you. I won't rob you of all, and if you choose to accept the love that I proffer, why, you can have everything that you want for all the rest of your life."

The glowing face of the young girl amply expressed the contempt she felt for the offer, and Jason, shrewd, sharp-sighted observer, saw that, despite the peril of her position, she was not at all inclined to comply with his wishes.

"Come, the casket!" he exclaimed, imperiously.

"I will not tell you where it is!" she replied, defiantly.

"Girl, don't be foolish!" Brevoort cried, rage in both face and voice. "Don't force me to commit a crime that hereafter I may repent. Consider your situation! You are entirely in my power; this man yonder cannot help you. Tell me where the casket is hidden or I shall do you a mischief!"

A single step he took toward the girl; he raised the keen-edged bowie-knife in the air, and as he did so the clear voice of Gray from the rocks above rang out full and strong:

"Halt!" he cried. "I do not wish to have any man's blood upon my soul, and therefore I am not anxious to strike at the life of even such a villain as you are, but I give you fair warning that if you advance another step toward that lady I will fire."

The desperate New-Yorker could restrain himself no longer, but turned about and faced Gray.

"You are as harmless as a child!" he retorted; "you are powerless to injure me! Your weapons are no more dangerous than two pieces of old iron. I laid a trap for you and you were not skillful enough to keep out of it. Your weapons are doctored: every nipple is plugged!"

Gray could hardly believe his ears; it seemed impossible, but he soon found that the lawyer had spoken the truth, for in his anger he leveled the weapon full at Brevoort's head and fired.

The cap exploded, but that was all; no report followed. He tried every chamber of the cylinder and with the same result.

Jason laughed loud and long.

"Oh, I speak the truth, sometimes!" he exclaimed, in mockery.

And then the thought of how the trick had been done flushed upon the mind of Gray.

"You villain!" he cried, in hot rage, shaking his clenched fist at the brawny tavern-keeper, "this is your work, and yet I have done you many a favor."

"A man must live," replied Hugan, sullenly, "and I should be a fool to lose a chance to make a stake when I knew that if I didn't do the job somebody else would."

"I'll be even with you for this!" Gray exclaimed.

"We're wasting time; and now, since you, Alma, have defied me, I'll strike a blow at you that you will feel!" Jason cried, and with the word he quickly plucked his revolver from his belt and leveling right at the breast of Gray, who was busy trying to extract the soft pine plugs from the nipples of his revolver, fired.

The hammer fell, the cap exploded, but the pistol missed fire.

Gray started as if to seek shelter, but there was none at hand, so he threw himself down flat upon his face on the top of the rock, and thus, in a measure, covered himself from Jason's fire.

In a rage the New-Yorker snapped the revolver again, and with the same result; the cap exploded, but the pistol obstinately refused to go off.

And at this point the big tavern-keeper burst into a loud laugh.

"It's no use, pardner!" he cried; "you might snap away till you're as white as the top of the snow-kivered peaks! Nary a fire will you git out of that machine, nor the other one, too."

"What do you mean?" cried the young Owl, in amazement.

"Sarse for the goose, sarse for the gander, you know!" the outlaw replied, with a grin. "You hired me to fix Mister Gray's wepons for you and I did the job like a man and a brother, but then I reckoned that I would do a leetle on my own account, and as I expected that you intended to go a-gunning for him, and as he had done me a favor or two, I jest made up my mind that you shouldn't 'wipe' him out, so when you lay down to take a snooze I just plugged up the nipples of your revolvers, too, so as to make an even thing of it!"

For a moment the rage of Brevoort almost choked him, and he felt inclined to fly at the throat of the man who had so cunningly balked him of his vengeance, but Ben Hugan was not to be caught napping; his hand was on the butt of his revolver; he was ready for action, and Brevoort felt tolerably sure that the nipples of that revolver were not plugged; so he was compelled to swallow his rage.

Gray, upon the cliff above, who had not lost a word of the dialogue, reechoed the laugh of the burly tavern-keeper.

"We'll call the account square, Hugan!" he cried, "and I'll bear you no malice for the trick you played me, since you put the same thing upon this scoundrel. We shall meet again, Jason Brevoort, when both of our tools will be in working order, and when we do meet, it will be the worse for one or both of us."

Brevoort, thus baffled in his attempt upon the life of the man whom he hated so bitterly, had no means of revenge open to him but to assail the girl. Through her he could strike a blow at him.

He thrust the useless revolver into its holster, and once again unsheathed the keen-edged, broad-bladed knife.

"Alma, I'll give you one last chance!" he cried; "reveal to me where the leaden casket is hidden, or, by the heaven above us, I swear I'll drive the knife to your heart!"

But, as he advanced, with wonderful quickness Alma drew the revolver from beneath her cloak and fired:

Two shots in rapid succession, and each bullet told.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TREASURE SECURED.

With an ugly groan Brevoort staggered and fell, wounded by the first bullet, and then, with a muttered curse, Hugan went down, stricken by the second leaden missile.

The orphan girl at bay had dared as women seldom dare!

Her foes were disabled, and then, understanding that their wounds might not be fatal, and that they might soon recover, Alma sprung to secure the leaden box. She removed the square stone; beneath this stone was a small cavity filled with loose earth and pebbles; these she pushed aside, as she had been directed to do, and, sure enough, there was the little leaden case in which the eccentric old miner had concealed his valuables!

Quickly the girl possessed herself of this article, which she had struggled so to gain, and then fled down through the canyon, first crying out to Gray that she would meet him at the junction of the two trails.

The prize was Alma's at last, but at a terrible cost!

Gray hurried along the upper road and was first at the junction, but he did not have long to wait, for in a few minutes Alma came up, breathless with haste.

"Do you think that they are dead?" she cried, earnestly. Now that the excitement of the moment was over, the natural repugnance of her sex to the shedding of blood came strong upon her.

"Oh, no, I think not," Gray replied, reassuringly, although he did think that both of the men were pretty badly hit, as they had been so effectually disabled, but he understood how the girl felt about the matter, and he desired to ease her mind.

"I had to do it!" she exclaimed, as they walked along, side by side; "there was nothing else for me to do!"

"Most certainly, it was either your life or theirs."

"You see that I was right in my presentiment. I judged this man better than you, and

even now, if he is not dead, he will be sure to make us more trouble."

"He will not dare to openly attack you, and against a secret assault you must be on your guard. Of course you will not go back to the log tavern, after what has occurred?"

"No, but where shall I go?"

"Why, take possession of your uncle's old house, on the mining property; it is there just about as he left it. There's an old Irish woman in the camp, Mrs. Flanigan, whose husband died a little while ago, and she has since supported herself by taking in washing, who will be glad to come and live with you. She's as honest as the day, and you can trust her, thoroughly."

"And you will come, too? I shall not feel safe if you are not there to protect me!" Alma cried, earnestly.

Gray was visibly affected by this proof of the orphan girl's confidence, and in his "heart of hearts," he determined, no matter what came, to be worthy the trust she reposed in him.

"All right, Miss Alma, if you say so," he replied.

By this time they had reached the outskirts of the camp, and Gray halted before the door of a miserable shanty, the residence of the widow Flanigan, as he informed Alma.

The widow, who was a stout, wholesome-looking matron, about as broad as she was long, had not yet retired to rest, and after ascertaining who her visitors were, admitted them, and Gray proceeded to explain what he desired Mrs. Flanigan to do.

The worthy woman accepted the offer, gaily, and, as she had nothing to detain her, she closed up her house and went at once to the mine, with the others.

As Gray had said, the little log house was in exactly the same condition as old Dick Van Dyke had left it. It was quite a cosy little place, and contained three apartments, so that there was plenty of room to accommodate the two girls, the old woman, and the hero, Gray—for hero he was in their eyes.

As soon as he saw Alma comfortably disposed, Gray went at once to the tavern and brought Agnes.

And then, in presence of the two girls, Gray opened the leaden box, at Alma's request.

The papers within it were in excellent condition, and every document that Dick Van Dyke had desciptively was there; not one was missing.

The game, at last, seemed fairly in Alma's hands.

And now we will return to the two men whom the firm hand of the desperate girl had stricken down in the canyon.

By a miracle, almost, as it would seem, neither one of the shots had proved fatal, although both had produced ugly wounds, and, for a few moments, caused insensibility.

Brevoort received the ball in his chest, while Hugan had been partially stunned by the leaden missile creasing the side of his head.

The shock soon passed away, and the burly tavern-keeper sat up and rubbed his head, in a bewildered sort of way.

"Cuss me!" he cried, "if I don't feel as if some one had hit me a good welt on the head with a big stick. I reckon that the bullet must have grazed my skull. Durn me! if that leetle gal ain't all grit to the backbone!"

And then, his eyes fell upon the prostrate figure of his companion.

"She plugged him, too," he muttered. "I reckon, from the way he lies, with nary a kick, that he's got his ticket for soup. Well, maybe she's cheated the hangman of a job, for I reckon that my partner would have been pretty certain to have stretched hemp one of these days.

Then Hugan got upon his legs and walked over to where Brevoort was stretched out at full length.

If not dead, the New-Yorker certainly seemed pretty near to death's door.

The big tavern keeper bent over him.

The blood was flowing freely from the wound in his breast, but he still breathed.

The shock of the pistol-wound had first produced faintness, and then the great flow of blood had prolonged it.

Hugan set at once to stop the ebbing of the life-stream and soon succeeded; in a very few minutes the strong constitution of the man asserted itself, and, to Hugan's astonishment, the wounded man opened his eyes.

"Well, well, pardner, I thought that you was done for!" the tavern-keeper exclaimed.

"Curse that little tiger cat!" Brevoort cried, sitting up, to Hugan's further amazement. "I had no idea that she had a revolver, or if I had had, I wouldn't have believed that she could have used it so effectually."

"Oh, these women are tough, sometimes!" the other remarked.

"Where are they—both gone?" asked Brevoort, looking around him.

"I reckon so; I don't see hide nor hair of 'em!"

"And the casket—the leaden box; they have taken that, too, I suppose?"

"You're pretty near right about that, I reckon," and then Hugan's eyes fell upon the displaced stone and the cavity which it had

hidden. "Sure enough! that's the very spot now, whar the box was stowed away."

"I seem to have had the fiend's own luck, lately," Jason snarled, rising slowly to his feet. He was weak from loss of blood, but otherwise was not seriously hurt, for the bullet had passed clean through his side.

"You're lucky enough to git clear of death," Hugan rejoined; "two inches the other way and saltpeter wouldn't have saved you; but no, what are you going to do? The gal has won this trick, for sure!"

"One trick don't make a game," Brevoort replied. "But for the present I can't do anything. For the next week or two I shall be on the sick list until this infernal hole in my side heals up."

"You don't give it up, eh?"

"No, sir, not by a jugful!" returned Brevoort, decidedly. "Now then, Ben, let us come to an understanding. Are you going in with me or not? If not, why, I'll look around and get another pal."

"Will the game pay?"

"If we win, yes. I guarantee that if I succeed I can pay you more money than you will be able to make out of that little tavern ranch of yours in the next five years."

"All right; it's a bargain, then; you can count me in. Anyway I ought to try to get even with the gal, for she cracked me on the head with a bullet and came within an ace of splitting my skull; my head rings now from the lick!"

"Get rid of your tavern, then, and find some little shanty on the borders of the camp where we can lie shady."

"I can do that easy enough; that's a man in the town who has been trying to buy me out for a month, and as for the shanty, I know one that will suit exactly, and it's on high ground, too—only a short distance from the Little Montana mine, so that you can keep your eyes on this Mister Gray all the time without his suspecting it."

"That will do, and now let us get along at once, for my wound needs attention, and the quicker it is fixed the better. By the way, I may need a few good men in the next move I make; you can get them, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, twenty if you like; that's plenty of hard boys round glad of any chance to make a stake, and they are not particular, either, in regard to how they make it."

"That's the kind I want."

The two then went on their way, but before they had proceeded far Brevoort discovered that his wound was more serious than he had imagined, and he was forced to ask the assistance of his companion's arm.

Their progress afterward was extremely slow, and it was quite late when they reached the little cabin away up on the mountain which Hugan had selected for a head-quarters.

After seeing Brevoort safely on his bunk, Hugan hurried down to the camp after medicines. In truth, the tavern-keeper was afraid that his companion was done for; but upon his return with the articles which he had procured he found that the injured man had fallen into a sound and healthy sleep.

Jason Brevoort had a wonderful constitution and was worth a dozen dead men at the least.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PRECIOUS PAPERS.

The unexpected arrival of the orphan heiress was a nine days' wonder to the inhabitants of Montana Bar, for it did not take long for the news to be spread abroad that the "leetle gal" to whom old Dick Van Dyke had left all his property, had taken up her quarters in the cabin so long occupied by the eccentric old miner, and, as a natural consequence, there were very few of the Montana-Barites, who did not make bold to call and get a look at the plucky feminine, as she was commonly termed, who was bold enough to trust herself in the wilds of the Black Hills on purpose to look after her estate.

Gray acted as a sort of master of ceremonies, and introduced the visitors.

Nothing but pleasant words and kindly faces greeted the young girl, and she felt that, though she was a stranger in this wild Western land, yet these men, rough as they appeared, would not stand tamely by and see her wronged.

As it so happened, the principal one of the lawyers who was conducting the suit which had clouded the title to the mine was in the camp. He had come up expressly to see the property, never thinking of course that he was likely to meet the heiress, but when he found that she was in town, he came to the conclusion that he would take a look at her just to see what sort of a woman she was.

Now this lawyer was from Cheyenne, and well known to Gray by sight, and the superintendent, who happened to be standing outside of the house, at once accosted him by name as he came up.

"How are you, Mr. Larabee," he said. "I have rather the advantage of you; my name is Gray, and I am the superintendent of the Little Montana."

"Ah, yes; glad to see you, sir," replied the lawyer, who was a tall, thin man with a decided

ministerial look. A very able lawyer, too, he was reported to be, although his enemies declared that he was much more of a pettifogger than a regular practitioner; but this was malice, of course.

"You are on the other side in this matter, I believe," Gray remarked.

"The other side?"

"Yes; I'm for Miss Alma, you know, and I am very glad that I have met you, because I have got some little legal documents which I wish you to inspect, and which, I think, will be pretty certain to convince you that the case you have taken hasn't got a leg to stand on."

The lawyer was somewhat taken aback, to use a nautical phrase, at this blunt declaration; and Gray, perceiving by his face that he was considerably astonished, proceeded to follow up the advantage.

"I reckon that you have taken hold of this case on speculation, and I want to show you right away that there isn't a dollar in it for you. I am not talking for a compromise, you know, because we've got you foul, and I reckon that if we did come to trial, after your principals got through testifying, we would stand a pretty good chance of sending them to State Prison for perjury."

Then Gray conducted the astonished lawyer into the house, introduced him to Miss Van Dyke, and then paraded before his amazed eyes the written acknowledgment of all of his clients that they had been paid in full, and that Dick Van Dyke owed them nothing.

The lawyer stared for a few minutes blankly at the papers; here was evidence that the cleverest legal gentleman could not explain away; the receipts clearly proved that the men who had brought the suit either were extremely forgetful or else were nothing but unprincipled liars.

Mr. Larabee hemmed and hawed; then he grinned a ghastly smile; it was no joke to see his prospective fees thus rudely made to vanish; and finally owned that his clients really had no "case," and that, as an "honest" lawyer, he should feel obliged to tell them so.

In plain English, as there was clearly no money in the suit for him, he was going to drop it like a red-hot coal.

The leaden casket had contained a treasure indeed.

Time passed away; the suit was discontinued, and Alma's lawyers in the East had brought an action to compel the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort, now represented by the son only, to render an account of their management of the orphan girl's property. An answer was at once returned, denying that Alma was Alma, and pronouncing her an impostor, for Jason Brevoort had engaged great legal talent to defend his cause.

But, Alma still lingered in the little mining camp.

She felt sure that Jason Brevoort was not dead, although since the night when she struck her first blow at her foe, she had neither seen nor heard of him, but she was certain that he lingered near, with evil purpose.

In the courts of law he stood no chance whatever; the false Alma—his Alma—honest-hearted Agnes, had joined hands with the girl whom she had been brought forward to represent, deserting the trickster who had been using her as a tool to serve his own base ends.

In the East, Alma had no fear but that she would triumph, yet in the wild West, in the savage Black Hills, where each man was a law unto himself, she dreaded the fierce and unscrupulous anger of her foe. Already had she seen that Brevoort would not be apt to stop at anything to accomplish his designs.

She had beaten him so far; her fortune was secure from his attack. It was only a question of time now, and soon the courts would not only put her in possession of all her property, but would also call the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort to a strict account in regard to the manner in which they had handled the same; defeated then at all points, nothing was left but vengeance.

Vengeance not only upon her but upon the superintendent of the Little Montana who had so completely beaten the lawyers at their own dark game.

Indeed, Alma feared more for Gray than she did for herself, and that was why she lingered in the little mining-camp, much to the astonishment of Agnes, who, long ago, had pronounced it a "horrid" place, and had wondered, now that the lawsuit about the mine was settled, and the papers so clearly proving Alma's identity were in her possession, that she did not return to the comforts of civilization.

But Alma had such a strange presentiment of evil! Time passed without anything of note occurring, but matters and things in the little mining-camp had changed materially.

Montana Bar was quite a new place; it had not yet arrived at the dignity of a town, and like all new camps without proper officers to hold in check the bad characters, such persons naturally flocked into it, driven away from the older camps.

True, the Vigilantes had once risen in their might and cleared out the place, but that was

over a year ago; and although, for the time being, the lesson that the birds of prey received was a terrible one, yet now it was almost entirely forgotten.

And so it happened that, at the time of which we write, the little mining town had about as big a collection of scalawags as any camp of the same size in the Black Hills could exhibit.

Nor was Montana Bar at all proud of this fact, either, and, as the parties of evil repute seemed to be getting bolder and bolder every day, the leading men of the camp—the old, substantial citizens—were beginning to agitate the subject of another Vigilance Committee.

"It's about time that Judge Lynch was up!" became a common remark, and even the most careless man in the settlement could not very well help observing that trouble was brewing.

The birds of prey quarreled and fought among themselves; this, in the opinion of the honest miners was all right; the quicker the vagabonds killed themselves off the better; but when the gamblers and their hangers-on, rendered desperate by an ill run of luck, took to the highway, confronted peaceable men on dark nights in lonely situations, thrust a revolver under their noses with the cry of, "Throw up your hands," and then when the victim complied—unwillingly enough always, but *persuaded* by the revolver—went through their pockets and relieved them of their valuables, then the men of the camp of Montana Bar thought it was about time Judge Lynch should interfere.

The outrages were becoming alarmingly frequent; men were stopped right inside of the limits of the camp, and compelled to "come down," and finally, almost every man that ventured abroad, after a certain hour, carried his cocked revolver in his hand ready for action.

There were two of the desperadoes who were wonderfully bold, and they acted in concert. Their faces were covered by black masks, and yet, in spite of the disguise, two or three of the victims thought that, from certain circumstances, they recognized at least one of the marauders.

But these victims, when they related the story of how they had been abused, hesitated to declare openly their suspicions, for it seemed almost incredible that they could be correct; but as there were eighteen or twenty men in the camp and neighborhood who had suffered at the outlaws' hands, when they talked the affair over in private they compared notes and the name of the man whom they thought to be guilty, and which they hesitated to speak in public, came out.

"I wouldn't have suspected him no more nor than I would my own brother!" one declared, "but the boots—"

"Yes, them boots; that ain't another pair like 'em in the camp!" another one exclaimed.

"I knew 'em the moment I set eyes upon them, 'cos the moon came out just as he went for me and I had a good squint at him!" a third declared.

The next morning, bright and early, the Vigilantes were "up."

Forty well-armed men, resolute for justice and to redeem the camp from the evil name that had come upon it; and the first move that the Vigilantes made was upon the Little Montana mine.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE VIGILANTES.

The Vigilance Committee comprised all the principal men of the town, the leading miners, store-keepers, and reputable saloonists, to coin a word, for, even in the little mining camp there was a vast difference in the character of the various saloons. A few were first-class places, and recognized as such—general centers where at night the miners gathered to hear the news, take a social drink, and discuss matters and things in general. The men who ran these places prided themselves upon the perfect order that was kept, and if any pilgrim from the mountains happened in and took more fire-water than was good for him—if he wanted to sleep, and was peaceable, he was accommodated with a bunk in the rear room, where both he and his valuables were just as safe as though he was in his own mountain cabin. If, on the contrary, he was warlike, proclaimed that he was a chief, and boasted that he could run the town, he was invariably hustled out in an extremely uncivilized manner.

In the wild western land the men who keep respectable saloons are not tabooed from decent society, and, in fact, even the professional gambler, as long as he is a "square," fair sort of fellow, and of gentlemanly breeding, is not altogether given the cold shoulder.

But, in Montana Bar the saloons that were not first-class were vile dens, indeed; a drunken man never got into one of them and got out again with any valuables left on his person; he might consider himself a lucky fellow if he was not stripped almost to the skin, and if the victim resisted, force was used; the wolves that herded under these roofs never stopped at bloodshed, if a few dollars could be gained thereby.

And it was to "clean out" these vile dens, as well as to lay by the heels the desperadoes who

were making it unsafe to walk by night in and around Montana Bar, that the good citizens of the camp had banded and risen in their might.

A good man was at the head of the Vigilantes—Joe Throckmorton by name, the principal store-keeper of the camp, an old Californian—one of the men of '49, and therefore pretty well posted in the art of "purifying" a town.

Throckmorton was a big man, with a gray beard, and an imposing, portly presence—a bold, courageous fellow, as well as an able one, and it would have been a difficult matter to have selected a better man for Judge Lynch.

His body-guard, the sheriff's posse—Judge Lynch's sheriff—all were picked men, armed to the teeth, and it was their business to see that the sentences of the judge were carried out. The commander of the guard, the sheriff, was the principal saloon-keeper of the town, Colonel Dan Sloper, a south-western giant from Missouri, reputed to be the "toughest cuss" in a personal difficulty north of Deadwood. A better officer to execute justice upon a guilty criminal could not have been "scared up."

As we have said, it was bright and early when the Vigilantes started, and it did not take them long to cover the distance which intervene between the camp and the Little Montana mine, but, early as was the call, the superintendent of the mine was up.

The Vigilantes, expecting of course that the superintendent was still asleep, took particular care to surround the cabin, so as to cut off all hope of escape if any of the inmates should attempt flight.

And then, after these precautions were taken, the colonel, at a signal from the judge, advanced to knock at the door, but just as he raised his hand, the door opened and Gray appeared.

It was just accident, of course, for the superintendent had no idea that a soul was near. He had risen early, as was his custom, and was about to go down to the stream to take a wash.

Gray, naturally, was extremely surprised to see Sloper—whom he knew very well—at such an early hour, but when he looked beyond the colonel and discovered all the rest with arms in their hands, he instantly came to the conclusion that something out of the common run was up, but never, for a single moment, suspected that they came with hostile intent toward him.

"Hallo! what's up, colonel?" he inquired.

"The Vigilantes have ri-en," Sloper replied, somewhat embarrassed at the superintendent's evident surprise.

"Is it possible?" Gray exclaimed. "Well, I presume the air does need a little purifying. You want me to come along, I suppose?"

Sloper was in an extremely disagreeable position. As he said, afterward, he never felt so much in all his life.

"Well—yes, I reckon that we would like to have you come along," the sheriff observed.

Gray, noticing the strangeness of the colonel's speech and manner, surveyed him in astonishment.

"Why, old fellow, what is the matter with you? What's up, anyway?"

"Nothing—nothing at all," Sloper replied, striving to appear unconcerned.

The worthy colonel was considerably flustered, but Gray hadn't the slightest suspicion that he was the cause of it.

"Well, just hold on a moment until I 'heel' myself, and then I'm with you," and as he spoke Gray turned to retrace his steps. For a wonder he was not armed.

The colonel saw at once that this would not do. The superintendent was unarmed, and therefore an easy prey, but once let him provide himself with weapons and then understand the nature of the charge brought against him, and he would be pretty certain to give considerable trouble.

And then, another idea flashed across Sloper's mind; perhaps Gray did suspect what this early morning call by so many prominent citizens of Montana Bar meant, and his withdrawal into the house was only a trick whereby to gain time to escape.

The colonel felt that his reputation as a sheriff was at stake, and that he must act promptly.

"Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Gray!" he exclaimed. "You won't need your weapons. Take my advice and don't get them; you will get along much better without them."

And as he spoke, the colonel drew his revolver from its holster and deliberately cocked it.

There could be no mistaking the man's meaning, this time, and Gray, fully understanding now that the men had not come to call for his assistance as a brother, but that their intent was the reverse of friendly, resolved to meet the danger with a bold face as an honest man should.

"What do you mean, Sloper?" he exclaimed, turning about and looking the Vigilante sheriff full in the eye. "If you want me to join your crowd as a fighting-man to help put a rope around the necks of the rascals of the camp, you want me to come armed of course."

"We don't want you armed, Mr. Gray," the colonel replied, slowly.

"To come right down to the point!" cried the superintendent, impatiently. "If you want

me and don't want me armed, it is as a prisoner then!"

"I regret to say, sir, that that is about the size of it."

Gray flushed red in the face; and for a moment he hesitated for words. He was in an extremely awkward position. He felt that he was accused of some crime and yet for the life of him he couldn't imagine what it could be.

"What have I done—of what am I accused?" he said, at last.

"It ain't for me to say, Gray, you know," Sloper replied. "My duty is to arrest you. You will have a fair trial, and there ain't a man in the Black Hills that would be better pleased to see you come safe out of it than I."

"Must I go with you now?"

"That's the orders."

"I suppose you will have no objection to my letting Miss Van Dyke know what has happened, so that she will be able to see that the mine is properly attended to?"

"Oh, there'll be no work done to-day; all your hands are in our crowd. Mighty little work will be done in or around Montana Bar until this hyer thing is settled. We've started strong, and we mean to put her through, b'ilng," Sloper replied.

The conversation at this point was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the two girls—Alma and Agnes.

Both had risen early, and from one of the windows of their shanty had noticed the unusual gathering of strange men and the parley that had ensued between Gray and the colonel, and although they could not overhear the conversation, yet it was plain to both of them that the strangers came on a hostile mission, and that danger to the Little Montana superintendent was threatened.

"What is the matter, Mr. Gray?" Alma exclaimed, as she advanced; "what is the meaning of this assemblage of armed men?"

"The Vigilantes are up, marm!" cried the colonel, bluntly.

"The Vigilantes!" cried both the girls, in chorus.

"Yes, Miss Van Dyke, and they are after me," Gray observed, and he half-smiled, as if the thing was all a joke after all.

"After you!" cried Alma, the hot blood flushing her face; "and for what crime?"

"That is more than I can tell," Gray remarked.

"It is an outrage!" Alma exclaimed, indignantly. "Mr. Gray is no criminal. This arrest is ridiculous. I will go his bail, and stake even the Little Montana mine upon his innocence!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ACCUSATION.

BOLD words, and there wasn't a man in the throng but what admired the pluck of the little woman and envied Gray the favor which he evidently enjoyed in her eyes.

The colonel looked at Judge Lynch, and Throckmorton, understanding that it was time for him to put in a word or two, at once advanced.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Van Dyke, but in such a case as this it is impossible to accept bail. This man is charged with heavy crimes, and Judge Lynch must set in judgment upon him. It isn't like a regular court of law, miss, and we don't go by regular forms at all. You know, miss, we are outside of the boundaries of civilization up in this little valley, and we haven't got courts and officers of law to keep evil-doers in check, but, when the rascals get too bold, and try to ride rough-shod over the whole community, why, then there's always a regular uprising of the honest, decent men of the settlement and the rascals have either got to git or suffer. Two or three of the worst cases we string up as a warning to the rest. If we didn't make things lively once in awhile, miss, there wouldn't be any living in these camps; we should be at the mercy of these cut-throats. As I said, afore, bail ain't of any use; Gray will be tried right off, and he'll get justice, miss, every time! If he is innocent of the charges which are made against him, he can easily prove it; it's justice we're after and all the legal quibbles in the world won't convict a man or save him. In all the wide world, miss, there's nary a court that puts things through as quickly as Judge Lynch."

"But, Mr. Gray is surely not one of the men whom you have described," Alma answered, instantly. "Mr. Gray is the superintendent of my mine, and is as honest and upright a man as you can find in all the wide world."

"Miss, you must really excuse me if I have to speak plainly," Judge Lynch remarked, slowly and with evident reluctance, "but you know the secret rascals in this hyer life are ten times worse than the open and above-board fellows."

"And do you mean to say that Mr. Gray is any such man?" Alma demanded, indignantly, the hot blood flooding her face with its crimson hue.

"No, I don't mean to say anything of the kind," Throckmorton replied, bluntly. "I am the judge who is going to try him, and it

isn't for me to say whether the man is innocent or guilty until I hear the evidence."

"Judge, to give you your legal title, Mr. Throckmorton, all w me to say a word!" Gray exclaimed, not able to remain silent longer. "I haven't the remotest idea why I am arrested, of what I am accused. I have lived some time here in Montana Bar, and since the day I first stepped foot in this camp I haven't had an angry word with any man. I have attended strictly to my own business, and I am as innocent as a child unborn of any act of wrongdoing, and therefore this arrest comes upon me like a thunder-clap. What does it mean, judge? Of what am I accused, and who is my accuser? Any of these men here?" and The Man from New York waved his hand toward the Vigilantes, who, with a great degree of interest, were watching the scene.

"Nary one on 'em," replied the judge.

"I thought not, for I know that none of them that I know—and I know about all of them—ever had cause to charge me with any evil-doing; on the contrary, quite a number of them can testify that I have never been anything but a quiet, law-abiding citizen."

"Your pal has betrayed you!" Judge Lynch remarked, shortly and sternly, and it was plain from the way in which he spoke, and the eager gaze that he fixed upon the prisoner, that he expected this announcement would be apt to astonish the accused.

And so it did, but not in the way that Judge Lynch and the rest had expected.

Instead of being dismayed or fear-stricken the superintendent only looked surprised.

"My pal!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, your pal!" repeated the judge, sternly. "It is of little use for you to attempt to deny the truth."

"Ah, but, judge, are you certain that it is the truth?" Gray rejoined, somewhat relieved in his mind, now that he had discovered what the trouble was. It was quite plain to him; by some mistake his accuser had confounded him with some other man, and when he was brought face to face with the fellow who had made the charge the error would be speedily discovered. "You know you mustn't judge the case until you hear both sides."

Throckmorton saw at once that he had been a little imprudent in his speech, and as he was really a good, fair man he hastened to make amends.

"Well, I reckon that I did speak a little hastily," he admitted. "But, I tell you the proof ag'in you is awfully strong."

"When I come face to face with my accuser, you may change your opinion in regard to that," Gray remarked, confidently.

"But you'll have the fairest kind of a trial; if you was my own brother, you couldn't have a squarer show."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that," Gray replied, instantly. "I am ready to go with you, sir, but it does strike me as being remarkably strange that you should receive the word of my accuser as law and gospel, when there isn't a man in all this throng that can say a word against me, and there ain't one of you that can—is there?"

The superintendent delivered the question boldly, and the miners, after glancing in each other's faces, as if one was anxious to know if the other could say anything against Gray, one and all shook their heads.

"Oh, you've covered up the trail mighty well—that is if you are the guilty man!" Judge Lynch declared. "You fixed things so cute that about the only man that can throw any light upon the matter is your pardner."

"That is something that I have never yet possessed," Gray answered. "Ever since I have sojourned in the Black Hills I have paddled my own canoe. But, what am I accused of doing?"

"Why, you are the masked robber who, with your pal, has rendered it dangerous for decent, honest men to step outside the doors of their cabins at night."

Gray burst into a laugh; for the life of him he could not help it, the accusation seemed so utterly ridiculous.

The miners looked at each other in astonishment. If the superintendent really was a guilty man he was carrying matters with a bold face, and his nerve must be really wonderful.

Even Throckmorton was puzzled, for this was not at all the sort of way that he expected the accusation to be received.

"So, I am the masked robber who has been cavorting around the town and making the boys throw up their hands!"

"That is what the man, your pal, who has betrayed you, swears," Judge Lynch replied.

There wasn't any doubt in the superintendent's mind now; it was clearly a question of mistaken identity, although how it could have occurred was a puzzle.

"Is my accuser present now?" Gray asked, anxious to settle the matter as quickly as possible, for he did not at all relish his position.

"No."

"I'm sorry for it, for the moment he and I come face to face you will see that he won't stick to what he has said."

The confident manner of the accused man had

due weight with the Vigilantes, and even Throckmorton felt shaken in the opinion which he had formed that the superintendent of the Little Montana was really a guilty man.

Guilty men were not usually so eager to confront their accuser.

"The quicker then, sir, that you bring Mr. Grav and this witness who has dared to accuse him so foully, together, the better!" Alma exclaimed, in just indignation. "It is a disgrace to your town that on a single man's word you should put such an affront as you have on this gentleman."

In no part of this wide world has a pretty woman's words more weight than in the wild, rude mining-camps of our far western territories, and these huge-bearded, roughly-attired, well-armed men looked askance at each other as the indignant speech fell upon their ears.

After all, wasn't the lady right in her denunciation? Hadn't they been a "leettle" fast in this matter?

Throckmorton, as the responsible leader of the band, felt that he was called upon "to rise and explain."

"Well, miss," he said, "mebbe it does look as if we were going to rush the thing a little, but, when Judge Lynch rises and gets a-going, he's a hull team, and no mistake. We don't take anybody's words, miss—that is, Judge Lynch doesn't, any more than a regular court. There's a charge made against this man—a pretty serious charge, too, and the man that makes it says that he can prove it sure."

"I defy him to do so!" Gray cried, instantly.

"We'll all know more about it afore we're an hour older," Judge Lynch replied. "This hyer court don't sit for to fix up private quarrels. This man says that you are the man who has been robbing the men in this valley right and left, for some time back, and he says that he has got evidence to back his words. There's two or three more that are willing to swear to things that squint pretty strongly ag'in' you, but, you're going to have a fair trial though and no favor, shown, either for or ag'in' you."

"That is all I ask!" Gray exclaimed. "And now the quicker we get at it the better."

"Fall in then and we'll be moving," Judge Lynch commanded.

"I will follow at once, Mr. Gray," Alma assured, as the "procession" moved off.

Truly there were good prospects ahead for a lively time.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ACCUSER.

The "procession" went straight from the mine to the center of the town.

The "Log Tavern," which was the principal hotel of the place, had been selected by Judge Lynch as his head-quarters.

Hughan no longer kept the hotel; he had sold out to Colonel Dan Sloper, who had long been anxious to buy the place, and after receiving his money had immediately proceeded to make himself "scarce." He had told Sloper that he intended to try his luck in mining, in some of the new camps at the north, and had at once departed.

The rising of the Vigilantes had been a complete success, much to the gratification of the good men and true who had taken upon themselves the difficult task of "cleaning out the town."

Not the slightest sign of resistance had been shown. Perhaps the determined manner in which the affair had been conducted had a great deal to do with that.

The Vigilantes had proceeded after the most approved fashion in such cases. They had risen suddenly and in overwhelming force, and at the very breaking of the dawn had proceeded to visit the different shanties, saloons, etc., where evil-doers were wont to congregate.

Brief and emphatic was the warning given:

"Git, or taste hemp!"

All that the black sheep did was to plead for time. All agreed to go, but merely asked time to prepare.

In fact, the majority of the parties whose absence rather than their company was desired, were pretty well used to this sort of thing. Montana Bar was not the first camp that they had been hunted out of and had been compelled to flee from in hot speed.

They took the matter very coolly; long experience had taught them that the moment a mining camp amounted to anything, civilization was sure to come in and human vultures, wolves, foxes and jackals must get out.

There was really only one important criminal that the Vigilantes desired to make an example of, and that was the masked robber who had been making it so lively for solitary wayfarers by night; and, thanks to the lucky chance that had placed the confederate of the daring road-agent in their hands, there seemed a strong probability that they would be able to accommodate the night outlaw with a hempen necktie.

The capture of the pal of the desperado was a plain proof to the Vigilante leaders of what could be accomplished through fear.

At the very third saloon that they raided, a ranch on the outskirts of the camp, a man had

come forward and expressed a desire to surrender, although he was a perfect stranger to all and no one would have made any charge against him.

He said frankly, though, that he was tired of being a rascal, and wanted to turn honest if he had a chance; and then he proposed to Judge Lynch to deliver the notorious road-agent into the hands of the Vigilantes, provided that they would give him a clean bill of health, as he aptly put it.

The Vigilantes jumped at the offer, for they had not expected any such luck, and great was their astonishment when the man accused the superintendent of the Little Montana and declared that he was the road agent!

At first the Vigilantes doubted the story, and more than one said openly that the man was a fraud; but he was equal to the occasion, and said, laconically, that proofs were better than talk, and that he could prove what he said; then he proceeded to mention certain things, and when the men who had suffered at the hands of the road-agent—many of whom were present—began to think over the particulars of their brief and decidedly unsatisfactory interview with the robber, to their astonishment they recalled sundry circumstances which really seemed to confirm the accusation.

As the stranger said, in his bold and decided way (for, as Colonel Dan Sloper observed, "he was no slouch of a man"), "I swear that Gray of the Little Montana is the road-agent, and I can prove it. Arrest him, then, and quick, too, for if he gets wind that I have made a clean breast of it, you won't be able to see his heels for dust, and if he gets a fair start, with his knowledge of the mountain passes, it's ten to one that you'll never catch him. Bring him face to face with me; let him dispute my proofs if he can, and if he does do so successfully, why then I'm in your hands to answer both to you and him!"

A fairer proposition couldn't be made, so the miners all agreed, and by this time a great many of them rather inclined to the belief that there was truth in the man's words and that Gray might be the road-agent, after all.

One thing was certain—the masked robber was no common man; a great many things proved that, and Gray was known to be a fellow of a great deal of ability.

Besides, many of the old miners present could recall a dozen cases where a prominent man in a mining camp had yielded to temptation and preyed upon his fellows.

And so it was that the Vigilantes were induced to pay their untimely visit to the Little Montana mine and make Gray a prisoner.

A sort of court had been rigged up in front of the Log Tavern, for in all trials of this kind the court room is always in the open air with the broad canopy of heaven for a roof, so that every one can see and hear.

It is the Vigilantes' boast that, if their courts do not deal much in law, they do dispense a "heap" of justice.

Judge Lynch took his seat, which was a keg placed on a dry goods box, so as to elevate him above the heads of the crowd; the prisoner, in custody of sheriff Sloper, was brought before him.

In a stentorian voice Sloper commanded silence, and the trial began.

Although Judge Lynch generally affects to despise the regular courts of law, yet he usually conducts his trials much after the same fashion.

"You are Gilbert Gray, superintendent of the Little Montana mine?" Judge Lynch asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You are accused of being the masked robber who, for some time past, has levied toll by night in these hyer streets of Montana Bar, and on the outlying roads!"

"It is a lie!" responded Gray, firmly.

"You deny the charge?"

"I do, and I demand to be confronted with my accuser, whom I defy to prove the allegation."

"The truth is what we are after," Judge Lynch remarked. "Bring forth the witness!"

Every one in the throng was now on the alert, and even Gray betrayed some curiosity, although he felt certain that he was the victim of a mistake, and that the moment he and the witness came face to face his innocence would at once be made manifest.

Judge of Gray's surprise when forth from the Log Tavern, in charge of a couple of the Vigilantes, stepped Jason Brevoort!

Immediately the truth flashed upon the superintendent: it was no mistake, but a deep-laid plot!

During the time that had elapsed since his encounter with the lawyer in the canyon, Brevoort had neither given up the struggle, as Gray had imagined, nor been idle; but, on the contrary, he had been busy in hatching this plan.

Jason was attired like a miner, in rough garments, and, as he had allowed his beard to grow, he looked the character which he was assuming, to the life.

"How are you, pardner?" he remarked, nodding carelessly to Gray, as he was brought forward to confront the prisoner. "I'm awful sorry that I had to put you in this hole, but necessity knows no law, and I am about tired of

skulking around the country, not daring to show my face for fear of having a rope tightened around my neck; and then, I knew, too, that the jig would be sure to be up, sooner or later, and as I reckoned that it was either you or me would have to swing, I concluded the hempen neck-tie had better squeeze your throat than mine; so I made a clean breast of it."

It was plain to all from the look upon Gray's face, that he recognized the witness, and this fact told against him in the minds of the crowd, although he seemed more astonished than afraid.

"And this is the witness who is going to swear my life away?" Gray observed, quietly.

"Yes; you acknowledge that you know him?" Judge Lynch remarked.

"Oh, yes, I don't deny that."

"Witness, do you know the prisoner?"

"Yes, like his own brother."

"What is his name?"

"Gilbert Gray; he is the superintendent of the Little Montana mine."

Do you know anything else about him?"

"Oh, yes; he and I have been pals for about a month, now. I happened to run across him accidentally. I applied to him at the mine for work, and he told me that he had all the hands about the mine that he wanted, but that if I was a man of grit, with plenty of sand in me, he could put me in for a good thing. Of course I said that I was open for anything, and that I didn't care much what it was, so long as I could make a decent stake out of it; and, to make a long story short, we agreed to go in together and do a little road-agent business in and around the town. He said that he was well posted, and knew who had money and who hadn't, and that by disguising his face no one would ever know or suspect him. It was arranged between us that he should come the pistol business and tell the game to throw up their hands, while I was to go through their pockets and relieve them of their wealth;

and that's exactly what we did, as I reckon a good many in this crowd can testify, for I see quite a number of men here that we tackled. I'll own right up that I've led a pretty bad life, but now I want to turn over a new leaf and get out of it, and that is why I am going back on my old pardner, hyer; but it's all for the good of your camp."

This recital was listened to by all with the utmost attention, and it was plain that the majority of those present believed the man had spoken the truth.

Judge Lynch, too, was decidedly inclined this way, but he was trying to hold the scales of justice with an even hand, and so he turned to Gray and bade him answer the accusation—if he could.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PROOF.

The thing was so utterly absurd that Gray wondered why Brevoort should go to the trouble of hatching up such a lie; he could not comprehend what he hoped to gain by it, for that he, Gray, would be able to refute the accusation he nothing doubted.

One might almost have heard a pin drop, so intense was the silence when Gray opened his mouth to reply to the statement of his accuser.

"This whole story told by this man is a lie from beginning to end," he said, firmly and distinctly, "with the single exception that he and myself are no strangers to each other. He never applied to me for work—look at his hands, and see if they show any signs of ever having wielded a tool."

This was a point scored by Gray, for Jason's hands indeed were not the hands of a working-man.

"Why this man should make this ridiculous accusation, which he cannot prove, is a mystery to me, except that we are enemies and have been for some time. He is a thorough scoundrel whom I have baffled in his schemes, and I presume that he brings this charge in order to get even with me, thinking that in the excitement of the moment I shall be condemned unheard."

"No chance of that!" cried Judge Lynch; "You are going to have the squarest kind of a trial!"

"That is all I ask. I have known this man for some time; I used to be a clerk in his father's office in New York city. His name is Jason Brevoort; he was one of the members of the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort, lawyers. He and his father attempted to wrong a young girl out of her fortune—that girl is Alma Van Dyke who is now in this camp, and who will testify in regard to this. I interfered and upset the scheme; but this man, hanging on like a bloodhound, has followed Miss Van Dyke clear to this camp, and only about three weeks ago in the canyon of Spearfish attempted to force her by violence to yield a portion of her estate to him. Luckily, she happened to be armed, and she was not afraid to use her revolver, and if you cause him to be examined, judge, I've no doubt that you can find the scar of the wound on him now."

"He's quite right about the wound, judge," Jason responded, not in the least discomfited, "but as for the lady he speaks of I never heard of her before in all my life. That's the man that shot me," and he pointed out one of the

miners, who was foremost in the crowd. "It was just about two weeks ago. We jumped on him, but he was ready for us, and I got it."

The miner thus brought into notice stepped forward and confirmed the statement.

He had been attacked by the road-agents, but as he happened to have considerable money on his person, he had taken the trouble, knowing that there were rascals about, to carry his revolver ready-cocked in his hands, so that when the footpads had jumped at him from behind, with the familiar slogan of "throw up your hands!" he had complied with the order to the extent of bringing his right hand up as high as his breast and letting drive at the nearest robber; the man had cried out as if he had been hit, and then both of the fellows had taken to their heels and disappeared in the darkness. The miner perfectly satisfied with his escape had not attempted to follow them.

This was strong proof indeed, and Gray was amazed.

The accuser had scored a point.

Then Jason continued:

"And as to my being named Brevoort, he knows better than that; I never was in New York in my life. How long ago is it since you say that you were a clerk in the office of my father and saw me there?" he demanded, putting the question directly to Gray.

"A little over a year."

"And now I'll show you, fellow-citizens, that that ain't so!" Brevoort exclaimed, confidently. "Is there any man here that remembers the last time the Vigilantes rose in this hyer camp—just a little over a year ago?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" exclaimed some half a dozen voices.

"Well, I was here then, and stood trial for my life. I was accused of being Johnny Reid, the road-agent; gentleman John, he was called. I was acquitted, and dusted as quick as I could. Ain't there any one of you men that can identify me?"

There was, not only one but three who declared that the speaker was the man who had so narrowly escaped the hempen-cravat that the indignant miners had prepared for the man who had so disturbed the peace of the little valley.

"I reckon that that settles the Brevoort business!" the accuser remarked, triumphantly. "I couldn't very well be fooling around here and be in New York at the same time."

Now Gray comprehended how skillfully the desperate man had planned. His prolonged absence, too, from New York, was accounted for. He had been in the Black Hills at the time to which he referred, and now he had cunningly taken advantage of the fact to strengthen his story!

"And in regard to this Miss Van Dyke, if I understood what he said, she is in the camp now; bring her forward, and if she says that she has ever seen me before, why, then, I'm a liar and this man is innocent."

At this Gray was fairly dumbfounded—utterly at a loss to guess Brevoort's object in this bold challenge. Did he really think that he could bluster out of it in this bold way? It seemed impossible, for he must know if he knew anything, that the girl would surely denounce him for the villain that he was the moment she appeared.

"We will have the lady hyer, very soon," the judge remarked, "for she said that she would follow immediately."

"And now, judge, let me call a witness or two," Brevoort said, "men that we 'went' for, and see if they won't identify my pardner, hyer."

Some half a dozen stepped forward at once—men who had suffered at the hands of the night marauders, and, of the six, three, under the skillful questioning of Brevoort, testified that, in their opinion, although of course they could not say positively, the chief outlaw greatly resembled the prisoner. He wore the same kind of boots, high-top, cavalry affairs, and not very common in the camp; tilted his hat upon his brows in the same peculiar way that Gray did, and in some other particulars was like him.

And by the time that these men had concluded Gray began to realize that his enemy was making out a pretty strong case against him.

But though amazed and astounded at the web of proof that Brevoort had so skillfully woven around him, and out of the slenderest materials, too, yet Gray was confident that in the end he should triumph over the malice of his enemy, for he relied upon the evidence of the two girls to prove that his accuser was Jason Brevoort, and that he had a powerful motive in striving to procure his death.

"And now, judge!" exclaimed Brevoort, after he had finished the examination of his last witness, "haven't I made out a pretty clear case against this man? Ain't there just cause to believe that he is what I say he is?"

"You certainly have brought it pretty near to him," Judge Lynch admitted, slowly; and, in fact, in the mind of the judge there wasn't hardly any doubt in regard to the prisoner's guilt, for he was not lawyer enough to understand how extremely unreliable is circumstantial evidence, for, after all, throwing the evi-

dence of the accuser aside the rest was very vague.

"It is a good case, but I will make it better," Brevoort remarked, determinedly. "I want you to send the sheriff and a party with me to the Little Montana mine and there I will give you evidence that will convince everybody that this man deserves to hang if ever a man did."

Gray began to feel as a man might feel with the coils of a gigantic snake tightening around him.

What evidence did Brevoort expect to find in the mine that he so confidently counted upon it?

"What do you say to this visit to the mine?" Judge Lynch asked, addressing Gray.

"I can't say anything, judge, for I haven't the slightest idea of what the man expects to do there," Gray answered. "This man's story is a lie, and in regard to the testimony of these other witnesses who suffered at the hands of the road-agents, not one of them really identifies me. All that they can say is that in some particulars I resemble the man who did the deed, but, when the two ladies come their evidence will show that this man is Jason Brevoort, a villain whom hitherto I have succeeded in baffling at every turn."

"I'm ready to go after the other evidence which will convince you all, judge," Brevoort remarked, calmly.

The judge at once detailed the men and away they went with the sheriff and Brevoort at their head.

Gray, all the time that the trial had been progressing, had been anxiously watching for the appearance of the two girls.

Alma had said that she would follow instantly, yet over an hour had elapsed and she had not come.

And then, a sudden thought occurred to Gray—a thought that made the very blood leap in his veins.

Jason had apparently planned all the details of this dark plot with almost fiendish skill; suppose the abduction of the two girls had been provided for; it was quite possible, and if it was so, would not only account for the absence of the two from the scene of the trial, but for the confidence with which Brevoort courted the introduction of the evidence of Alma.

If he had so arranged it that Alma could not appear, of course her evidence could not be given to damage him and he was perfectly safe in declaring that he did not fear it.

Altogether the outlook for Gray was dark.

Inside of half an hour the party who had been detailed to visit the mine returned.

A wonderful discovery they had made; concealed between the blankets on the superintendent's bunk they had found three buckskin bags which were quickly identified by three miners, who had been robbed by the road-agents, as their property, and which the road-agent had taken.

Judge Lynch shook his head.

The proof was clear now.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN THE MESHES.

HARDLY a man was there in the crowd who had any doubt as to the guilt of the superintendent, when the new testimony was presented.

The production of the buckskin money-bags seemed absolute proof that Gray was indeed the renowned masked-robbbery who had made it so lively for the good citizens of Montana Bar.

After the sheriff had told his story, produced the bags, and the miners had identified them as their property, a deathlike silence fell upon the crowd.

It was ominous for the prisoner.

A mob is always the creature of impulse, and Judge Lynch's court is but an organized mob, to coin an expression.

So certain were the miners of the guilt of the superintendent, that no doubt if any one had suggested that Gray should be hung straightway, without further debate, it would certainly have been done, but, even Brevoort, with all his skill, was not shrewd enough to comprehend how easily he could have compassed the death of his foe if he had seized upon the golden opportunity to move for instant sentence.

The judge broke the silence; although, in his own mind he had no doubt of the guilt of the prisoner, yet he was willing to give him a chance to explain, if he could.

"Well, prisoner, what have you got to say to this? Can you explain away the evidence of these bags?"

"No, I cannot—not of my own knowledge," Gray replied, frankly. "All I can say is that I never saw them before in my life."

"Yet they were found concealed in your bunk, between the blankets."

"Yes, and found by this man, my bitter enemy, who is trying to swear my life away!" exclaimed Gray, pointing directly to Brevoort. "He who hides can always find, they say. Now, look how utterly absurd this bag affair is. Of what value are these trumpery bags? Why should any one wish to keep them? If I

am the masked road-agent, what utter madness it was for me to hide away these bags between the blankets of my bunk, where they could be found upon the slightest search! I am the victim of a plot contrived by this man. I don't doubt that he was one of the road-agents, and his companion, who was the other, assumed a dress as near like mine as possible, so that suspicion might be thrown upon me, and his vengeance thus accomplished. I say that this man lies when he says his name is not Jason Brevoort, and there are two witnesses in this camp who can prove that that is his name—his right name, no matter how many other ones he may have had while he was in the Black Hills here, a year ago. I don't doubt that he was here, for he was absent from New York quite a long time."

"Two witnesses, eh?" observed the judge; he was rather impressed with the recital, although it did seem somewhat like the desperate effort of a man who knew that death was nearly certain, and that a superhuman effort alone could benefit him.

"Yes; two witnesses, and each one of the two will back my statement by oath," Gray replied.

"Who are they?" Throckmorton had a pretty clear idea in regard to who the witnesses were when he put the question, but he thought it would be as well to let the prisoner explain.

"Miss Alma Van Dyke, and Miss Agnes Perseval."

"The two ladies who were at the mine, this morning?"

"Yes."

"Well, how is it that they ain't here?" and the judge cast a look down the road as though he expected to see the two advancing toward the town.

"How can I answer that question, judge, except by guessing at the reasons that detail them. You heard Miss Alma say yourself that she would follow, immediately; that was over two hours ago, and yet she has not come, and the mine is not twenty minutes' walk away. Did any of you see the two ladies when you went to the mine, just now, with this man?" Gray asked, abruptly, turning to the sheriff and the others who had accompanied Brevoort to the Little Montana property.

And now, for the first time, the thought occurred to the miners who had gone on the mission, that it was strange they had not seen the two ladies.

"Nary a female," responded Colonel Dan; "nary a soul was there, either in or around the mine."

"Yet, when I was arrested she was there—they were both there; you all saw them!" the superintendent cried, addressing his remarks to the crowd. "What has become of the two? They are not here, neither are they at the mine. Where are they then? Can you answer that question, my fine fellow?" and with his uplifted forefinger Gray pointed straight at Brevoort.

This was the only weak point in all Jason's dark and dangerous scheme.

Every eye in the throng was turned upon him and he felt that it was possible the whole success of his scheme depended upon his answer.

"What do I know about these two women?" he asked; "what should I know about them? It is easy to bluster and brag about what they would swear to, when they are not here. If they were on the ground maybe you would tell a different story. Brag is a good dog, but hold fast a better! What I have said I have proved, and I am not depending upon witnesses who don't seem anxious to come forward."

"I can answer the question if you will not, and yet I am only guessing at it!" For the first time Gray felt that he had secured a slight advantage and he was quick to improve the opportunity. "But I am sure that it is the truth, though. Only a little while ago when I denounced you for the villain that you are, and revealed your true name and the reason that you had to hate me, and said that I had witnesses to prove that you were Jason Brevoort, the New York lawyer, who has made such a desperate attempt to steal the Van Dyke estate, you denied the charge, and challenged me to bring on my witnesses. I wondered how you dared to play so bold a game, but now I understand. You did not fear to face Alma Van Dyke because you knew that she could not appear against you. You had provided for that. Now listen, all of you, to the truth! This man has abducted the two girls! They cannot brand him for the liar that he is for he has taken measures to have them carried off, the moment I was taken from the mine. The works were deserted, of course, for all followed after me. It was the easiest thing in the world for this man's confederates to seize the two ladies and bear them away to some secure hole in the mountains. If it is not so, where are they?"

Public sentiment is a funny thing; the tide which had been setting so strongly against the superintendent now began to turn in his favor. The mysterious disappearance of the two ladies was very strange indeed, and really no reason could be brought forward why they should

have vanished so oddly except the one that the prisoner had advanced.

The Man from New York had scored a most decided hit in his bold charge.

Judge Lynch was in a quandary; he knew not what to think. It was the strangest case that he had ever been mixed up with in all his life.

"What have you got to say to this?" he asked, addressing Brevoort.

"Why, the thing is too utterly ridiculous to demand any notice at my hands," Jason replied, contemptuously. "To save my own skin I turned State evidence, split on my pal, and showed you where he hid some of the plunder; and now, he tries to get out of it by this yarn. There's the buckskin bags; that's all I have got to say!"

"Fellow-citizens, how easy it was for any man to sneak into my cabin and stick those bags in my bunk!" cried Gray at the top of his voice. "My cabin door is seldom fastened during the day; how easy for any one to watch his chance and get in while I was busy in the mine. Is there any man here who can be sure that such a trick could not be played upon *him*?"

This was another point scored for Gray, for nearly all were ready to acknowledge that a trick of this sort could be performed with ease.

"Now, fellow-citizens," continued Gray, quick to improve the advantage that he had won, "I don't ask you to acquit me, but I do ask you to weigh the case well before you decide either for or against me. I am no stranger to you, men of Montana Bar; I have lived some time in this valley, and I challenge any man here to say anything to my discredit. This man is a stranger; do any of you know anything about him? what he is or where he comes from? If you simmer this case right down you'll find that it is his word against mine; and now the question is, which one of us two men are you going to believe? the man that you have known or the man that you know nothing of, except by his own statement, and according to that he *has* been one of the road-agents, and I think that there isn't much doubt about it, for he backs it up with pretty good proof. And if he throws the buckskin bags in my teeth, I throw the mysterious disappearance of my two witnesses in his, and I think that you all will admit that the honors are easy."

"Well, it does seem to be a pretty square thing," Judge Lynch admitted. "It would puzzle a better lawyer than I to tell which of you two men is in the right."

"Let time decide!" cried Gray, catching eagerly at the chance. "Keep me close prisoner until you are satisfied that I am either guilty or innocent; send out trailing parties—scour all the canyons and ravines near the town for these two missing ladies; they can't be very far off, and you must be able to find some trace of them; and if you once find them they will testify that this man is all that I say he is—a liar, a thief and a detestable perjurer."

"That suits me!" Brevoort exclaimed. "I'm not at all afraid to have the thing looked into, and I'll go on the trail myself! I intended to suggest to wait a while before you hung the man."

And so the trial ended.

Gray was placed in the Log Tavern under a secure guard, and the Vigilantes immediately proceeded to organize parties to search for the missing girls.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE ABDUCTION.

GRAY had guessed what had occurred to the ladies only too well. Indeed, Brevoort had planned the affair with almost fiendish cunning.

The moment that the Vigilantes had departed, bearing Gray away a prisoner, the two girls hurried into the cabin to prepare to follow the party to the town.

Few words passed between them, for they were too much agitated by the danger which had so abruptly come upon their protector, and too much in a hurry to follow and aid him, if it was within their power.

They were not ten minutes in donning their outward garments; then they hurried from the house, but as they passed through the door, heavy cloaks were thrown over their heads and shoulders and strong, rude hands grasped them.

So sudden was the attack, and so unexpected, that they were taken entirely by surprise.

They attempted to scream, but the heavy cloaks choked their cries.

The abductors moved quickly in their work; after muffling the girls with the cloaks, they passed lariats around them so as to securely bind their arms, and then, lifting them bodily from the ground, they bore them away.

There wasn't a soul in or around the mine; all the workmen had dropped their tools and hurried after the Vigilantes, eager to see the end of the affair, so that the abductors had a clear field.

A few hundred yards away, concealed in a big clump of bushes, were two horses.

With the girls in their arms the two men, who had played so bold a game, mounted the horses.

The beasts were tethered close to the waters of the Spearfish.

They rode at once into the creek, and then up it, through the water, thus adroitly destroying their trail.

It would be a clever tracker indeed who could follow the trail of the beasts whose hoof-prints in the sand were almost immediately destroyed by the water flowing over them.

A half-mile at least up the stream they went before they quitted it; then they took advantage of a spot where a well trodden trail crossed the creek.

Of course the hoof-prints of their horses could not be distinguished from the others that formed the trail, particularly as quite a party had passed along the road early that morning.

Along the narrow path they went for a mile or so; then they turned abruptly to the right and plunged into what was apparently a trackless wilderness, but, after passing the fringe of bushes that grew along the side of the road, a "blind" trail—to use the mountain parlance, was revealed.

And this narrow, winding way led upward into the mountains.

The beasts upon which the two men were mounted, were the rugged, half-savage ponies common to the region, used from childhood to the mountain passes, and as sure-footed almost as mountain goats.

Up, up nearer to heaven each moment they went, and finally stopped almost on the very crest of a big broad peak, one of the giants of the mountain chain.

There was a flat plateau there, an acre perhaps in extent, and heavily wooded.

From this plateau an extensive view could be commanded.

At the foot of the mountain, looking straight down the mountain-side, over the tops of the dark pines that thrived and flourished amid the rocks, ran Spearfish creek shining like a silver thread, and afar off in the distance, clustered by the side of the stream, appeared the little cabins which made up the town of Montana Bar.

A finer view than that afforded by this elevated position could not have been found in all the Black Hills, and it was on account of this view that Jason Brevoort had decreed that the two girls should be brought there, as the reader will see anon.

Never in this world did a man plan more shrewdly or more successfully, for, although Gray appeared to have gained somewhat the advantage at the close of the trial, yet in reality, if Brevoort had had the Godlike power of ordering events to his wishes, he would not have altered a single thing, and this, too, the reader will see anon.

At one end of the plateau, carefully hidden amid the trees, was a small cabin constructed rudely out of logs.

This was the old-time resort of Johnny Reid, Gentleman John, for Jason Brevoort and the road-agent were one and the same.

Some six months before the time when we first took up the thread of our story, and proceeded to detail the adventures of the orphan girl, Jason Brevoort had been compelled to make a hasty exit from New York.

No living soul but one—not even his own father—knew the reason of his flight.

Jason had been a pretty wild young man in New York, and he flattered himself that he was a match for the sharpest of men, but in the Black Hills the conceit was speedily taken out of him. He was well provided with funds, having made a raid upon his father before starting, but, within four-and-twenty hours after he arrived in the Black Hills he was drugged and robbed of every dollar that he possessed.

He did not dare to apply to New York for more money, for he was afraid to let any one, even his father, know of his whereabouts; so he endeavored to make a living as best he could; but fortune was against him; he got into bad company, and finally became a member of a road-agent gang, and at last the chief of the party. But, when the chase became hot after him, and he was hunted to the mountains like a wild beast, an old copy of a New York paper fell into his hands, and in the death column he read of the decease of a man whose taking off rendered it safe for him to return to New York. He wrote to the old Owl, and the instant the elder Brevoort received the letter he dispatched the celebrated detective, John Peters, knowing that full trust could be placed in him.

And if our readers will recall the opening chapter of this over true tale, they will remember that the detective arrived just in time to save Jason Brevoort, *alias* Johnny Reid, from dangling by a long rope from a pine tree.

To the cabin the two men—Ben Hugan, formerly landlord of the Log Tavern, and another tough character, equally as rough and unscrupulous—conveyed the girls.

The cloaks were removed from their heads and the lariats unloosed, Hugan first taking the

precaution to deprive Alma of the revolver which she wore. The outlaw had not forgotten the excellent use she had made of the weapon on the night when he and Brevoort had surprised her in Spearfish canyon.

The girls stared around them in amazement when the cloaks were removed and as both of them recognized Hugan instantly they had no doubt as to the instigator of the outrage.

"Now then, gals, we don't want no nonsense or nothing of the kind, or it will be the worse for you. You're hyer, way up on top of the mountains, all alone, and nary a living soul within five miles of ye; so it won't be of the least use for you to squeal or to kick up any row at all, 'cos it won't do the least bit of good. If you're quiet and behave yourselves you won't come to any harm; but if you go to being ugly and making trouble, why, you will only have yourselves to blame if we make it rough for you," Hugan observed.

"But, what is the meaning of this outrage?" Alma exclaimed, spiritedly; "why are we brought here?"

"It ain't any of my business to tell you, if I knew," the outlaw replied, "and as I don't know, I'm precious sure that I can't tell you. I reckon that you know who had you brought hyer."

"Yes; that villain, Brevoort!"

"That's the chap, and I reckon that he means to get even with you for the way in which you plugged him in the canyon t'other night. It war a plucky thing!" the outlaw added in a tone of admiration, "you pretty near made both of us cash up our checks for this world."

"It is a pity that I did not, for it would have saved the hangman some trouble!" Alma retorted, indignantly.

"But, we've got you foul now!" the outlaw replied, meaningly, "so you had better keep a civil tongue in your head."

Alma turned away. The fellow was right, and it was only a waste of breath to bandy taunts with him.

"Ah, I see that you are inclined to be reasonable," Hugan remarked after a pause. "Mebbe you'd like to take a look around you on the outside. I've got a powerful pair of field glasses hyer, and you kin see right into the camp at Montana Bar; the glass brings the people so near that it really seems as if you could speak to 'em."

And as the outlaw spoke he drew the field-glasses from his pocket.

Alma looked at the man earnestly for a moment. She suspected that he had some purpose in his suggestion, but what it was she could not understand.

"I don't care to look," she replied at last.

"Oh, you better!" he exclaimed. "You can see the Vigilantes try their prisoners just as well as if you were standing right side of them."

Alma could not repress a start. Did Brevoort, then, bring her here to see Gray suffer?

"And if they give Mr. Gray a chance to dance upon nothin'," he continued, "you would never forgive yourself if you didn't see the end of him."

"Give me the glass! I will look; but they will never dare to commit such an outrage."

"Better men than the superintendent of the Little Montana have worn Judge Lynch's cravat," the coarse outlaw replied with a horrid grin.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BREVOORT SHOWS HIS HAND.

ACCOMPANIED by Agnes, Alma hurried to the plateau. The outlaw had spoken truly; by means of the powerful glass she could plainly distinguish all that was going on in the open space in front of the Log Tavern.

With breathless interest she watched the progress of the trial until its close, and neither the judge, spectators, accused, nor any soul that formed part of the exciting scene, Jason Brevoort alone excepted, had any idea that the girl whose absence was so unaccountable, and whose testimony was so important, was watching the proceedings with anxious eyes.

The trial closed at last, and she beheld Gray escorted into the house—the Log Tavern—closely guarded and evidently a prisoner.

The Vigilantes had not executed summary justice upon him, and yet he was not released. Evidently the matter was not decided.

"Wal—they didn't hang him, I judge," the outlaw remarked, as the girl removed the glass from her eyes, "'cos you ain't squealed or nothing."

"They will not hang him!"

"That depends upon what a friend of yours says," the outlaw replied, and Alma understood at once that he referred to Jason Brevoort, for she had not failed to distinguish him with the glass, and had noticed that he appeared to be playing a most prominent part in the scene, and although, of course, she could not distinguish a word of the conversation, yet she could readily understand from the movements of the two, that Brevoort was Gray's accuser, and

that The Man from New York was repelling the accusation with scorn and indignation.

She was terribly agitated, for she saw that Gray was still held a prisoner at the close of the trial, while Brevoort was allowed to go free, and this to her mind indicated that her persistent and malignant foe had triumphed over her true and devoted friend.

She was in a terrible state of mind, and when she returned to the cabin she related to Agnes what she had witnessed, and confided to her the fears which had taken possession of her.

Agnes was poorly calculated to offer consolation, for she was utterly broken down by the peril of their present position, being far more weak and womanish than the resolute and high-spirited Alma.

Hughan and the other man kept guard at the door, which was the only means of egress from the house, as the cabin did not contain a window.

In fact, the cabin could not boast of much of anything; there was a couple of small logs set on end and three large stones, which answered for tables and chairs, and a buffalo-robe flung down on the floor over some pine boughs, served for a bed.

Hughan let the two girls talk on for some time, and then he ventured a remark:

"It was the boss's orders to let you see the fun in the town, and you can expect him here in an hour or two, and, mebbe, you can make some arrangement with him. I reckon that he won't be very hard on you if he sees that you are inclined to be sensible."

As a drowning man catches at a straw, so Alma caught at this hope. Gray was evidently in great danger, and to save the superintendent of the Little Montana, the man whom she had learned to love better even than her own life, she would willingly do anything—make any sacrifice—dare any danger.

The time passed slowly to the feverish, impatient girl, but at last Jason Brevoort's form darkened the doorway.

It had cost the scheming plotter some trouble to make his way unobserved from Montana Bar to the outlaws' hiding place high amid the mountains. He was afraid of being followed, for he had a suspicion that some friend of Gray might take it into his head to dog his footsteps; and indeed, at the first of it, he was sure that he was watched, but he turned and twisted with all the skill and cunning of a red Indian, and finally succeeded in throwing the pursuer off the track, that is, if he was pursued, and of this he was doubtful, for if he had been tracked, the tracker had displayed most excellent skill; but, as Brevoort toiled on up the blind trail, he often felt of the trusty revolver in his belt, and smiled grimly when he reflected that he was fully a match for any single man.

Alma rose eagerly to receive her foe, for now he was to her a messenger from the man she loved.

Brevoort noted the eagerness she manifested and his eyes sparkled; victory was within his grasp at last!

"We won't waste time in compliments, Alma," he said, frankly. "If I read your face aright you understand what has been going on in the mining-camp to-day—you understand that your particular and devoted friend, Mr. Gilbert Gray, is in great danger, and unless some one comes forward to save him he will be certain to ornament the end of a rope before the sun sinks this day."

"But he can be saved! there is a way to save him!" Alma cried, eagerly.

"There is, but let me explain to you first the extent of the danger that he is in. There have been a couple of road-agents operating, robbing men right and left after nightfall, in Montana Bar and its neighborhood. The faces of these men were always hidden, but one of them in dress and appearance strongly resembled the Little Montana superintendent. Now, when the Vigilantes rose this time one of these robbers came forward and made a clean breast of it; he confessed that he was one of the road-agents, and declared that Gilbert Gray was the other. He caused the cabin of Gray to be searched, and there in Gray's bunk concealed were some buckskin bags that had been taken from the miners by the road-agents. Gray denies the whole thing—says that it is all a trick to make him suffer on the part of a man who bears him a deadly hatred, and this man who is his accuser, he says comes from New York and his name is—"

"Jason Brevoort!" cried Alma, understanding the plot in a moment.

"Quite right; well, the man denies it—says that it is not so, and defies Gray to prove it and he cannot because his witness is absent."

"And I am that witness!"

"Correct again! Now, see what a terrible danger Gray is in; he will most surely swing unless you come forward to save him, and if you do appear the accuser most certainly will not, for it would not be healthy for him."

"I understand—I understand the trap in all its details!" Alma exclaimed, feeling at last that it was indeed impossible to cope with this man, who planned with all the art and cunning of a demon.

"Well, if you do understand you will see that my esteemed friend, Mr. Gray, is in a terrible hobble."

"What are the conditions—what do you want me to do?" asked Alma, weariedly; the contest at last was beating her down to the earth despite her iron will.

"Oh, I don't impose any conditions—I haven't any right to, you know," Brevoort answered, lightly. "But, if you feel disposed to recompense the care and attention that my honored father and myself have bestowed upon your affairs you can do so by signing this paper," and Jason drew a legal-looking document from his pocket, together with a fountain-pen, all ready for work. "This document recites that, in consideration of the sum of one dollar value received, and in further consideration of the care and attention that I have bestowed upon your estate to the neglect and ruin of my own business, you hereby transfer to me the Little Montana mine, to have and to hold, etc. I won't weary you with the dry details of legal particular, but, suffice it to say that you give me, absolutely, the Little Montana property; you have plenty besides that to bestow upon Mr. Gray when you bless him with your affection; and for such a lover as he has proved to be you are not buying him too dearly."

"I will sign," exclaimed Alma, reaching out her hand for the pen.

"Hold on a moment," continued Brevoort. "There is no compulsion about this, you know; you are not obliged to sign if you do not wish to; this lady will bear witness to that," and he nodded to Agnes, who gazed, open-eyed, at this strange proceeding—the full import of which she did not understand.

"And the moment this is signed," continued Jason, "you can hurry at once to the mining camp and give your testimony in favor of Mr. Gray, and your words most certainly will release him from all danger. These two gentlemen will conduct you and this lady, and within two hours after starting you will be in the camp."

"Give me the pen, I say!" Alma cried, firmly. "I do sign of my own free will, and I shall never strive to dispute the gift, I give you my word upon that!"

"And you will use your influence to prevent any one else from disputing the gift? Mr. Gray, for instance?" he questioned.

"He will do as I say; I give you the mine of my own free will, in exchange for his life!"

"How oddly you speak, as if I had anything to do with his life!" exclaimed Brevoort, who was getting facetious, now that he found that his triumph was secure. But, here is the place; put the signature there, and then you can hurry away to save Mr. Gray, for these Vigilante folks are terribly impatient, sometimes, and the miners rather enjoy these hanging matches."

A visible shudder shook Alma's frame, and she hastened to grasp the pen.

Her hand trembled as she wrote, but her purpose did not.

"Now, miss," he said to Agnes, "witness the signature; please sign your name here."

The girl complied, although unwilling, for she realized that at last Jason Brevoort had triumphed, and that by his cunning trick he had transferred at least two-thirds of Alma's fortune to himself.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HEAVEN'S JUSTICE.

"Now, gentlemen!" exclaimed Brevoort, his voice loud with triumph, "have the kindness to conduct these ladies to the camp, and as speedily as possible, and then meet me, you know where."

He stepped aside and waved his hand toward the door, as a signal for the two girls to depart.

They were not slow to avail themselves of the privilege, and at once hurried away.

Brevoort watched the party through the open door until they all disappeared within the thickets, which covered in the trail leading down the mountain.

"Not one farewell look for me," Brevoort muttered, a shade upon his face. "Well, what does it matter? There are women enough to be had in this world, as long as a man has plenty of money to gratify their whims, and one really is about as good as another. A man can't have everything in this life. I've got the mine, and my bold friend takes the girl. Nine men out of ten would be very apt to say that I had the best of the bargain, but I flatter myself that I worked like a beaver for it!"

Brevoort returned to the center of the cabin, and, seating himself upon one of the upright logs, took another look at the open document that he held in his hand.

"The mine is secured; who knows but what I may be able to get the girl, too, in time? All things are possible to a desperate and determined man," he mused.

True words were never spoken, as Jason Brevoort was to discover.

Hardly had the sentence escaped from his lips

when a man glided into the cabin, and confronted Jason before he had time to rise.

Brevoort recognized the new-comer at once, and his face turned a shade paler.

His suspicion was right; he had been tracked; the man was the New York detective officer, who figured so prominently in the opening chapter of our tale, John Peters!

"Hallo, John! Are you after me?" questioned Brevoort, his voice harsh and mechanical, for a presentiment that a terrible danger threatened him had crept over his soul.

"Yes."

"You've come a long way."

"Yes."

The detective had his right hand in his coat pocket and Brevoort suspected that he grasped a loaded and cocked pistol there.

"And you are determined to take me?"

"Yes; I'm to get five thousand dollars for you, alive—or dead!"

There was terrible significance in Peters's quiet tone.

"What is up?" Brevoort put the question calmly, although he guessed what the answer would be.

"Murder!"

"That villain has betrayed me, then?" Jason cried, hoarsely, through his clenched teeth. "And I thought that he was dead!"

"A blind—a trick, to throw you off your guard, for he feared that you would finish him some time to prevent the betrayal of your secret," the detective replied. "I've been on the scent ever since the affair happened; I never had any idea until recently that you had anything to do with it, or else I shouldn't have interfered to save you when the Vigilantes had you foul down in the camp yonder. Just about a year ago I ran the other one down, and to save himself, he gave you away."

And this was the crime, for which he now seemed likely to suffer, that had first made Jason Brevoort a wanderer on the face of the earth.

There had been an affray in a saloon at midnight; the affair was renewed outside in the street, and a young scion of one of the richest families in the city was stabbed to the heart.

Two men were concerned in the killing; one held the victim while the other struck the blow, and all were more or less under the influence of liquor when the affray had occurred.

The family of the murdered youth had spent money like water to discover the murderer, and now at last the crime was charged home to Jason Brevoort.

"Is there danger of my swinging for it?"

"Oh, no, I guess not; you've got plenty of money to fight the thing through."

Peters spoke carelessly, but Brevoort knew that there was danger. The mad times of the war had passed away, and human life was not held quite so cheap as it had been.

This was a terrible blow; the cup of triumph was at his lips when lo! the rude hand of the detective had dashed it down!

"You know my little game here?" and Brevoort held up the legal document that he had extorted from the orphan girl.

"Yes. I overheard about all of it."

"It's rough, just as I had everything fixed. Can't I 'square' you?"

Peters shook his head.

"Ten thousand dollars?"

"They'll double every dollar that you can offer, and I ain't that kind of a man either," the detective answered, slowly. "I gave my word that I'd bring you, and you know I'm a slave to my oath."

Brevoort turned pale and his breath came hard and fast.

"I will not go!" he cried, and he dropped his hand as if to grasp his revolver which was in his belt.

"Don't try that!" cried Peters, warningly. "Remember! it's alive or dead! I've got a cocked ounce-ball derringer in my pocket, and I can bore you long before you can get your revolver out if you force me to do it!"

For answer Brevoort leaped with wonderful quickness from his low stool, full upon Peters.

Although the detective was somewhat taken by surprise yet he bore the shock manfully. He did not attempt to draw his pistol, but, withdrawing his hand from the pocket grappled instantly with his assailant.

Peters did not wish to harm his bird, for he was determined to take him alive, if possible.

Apparently Brevoort was fully a match for the lighter-built detective officer, but in reality he was not, for a better boxer or a more expert wrestler than John Peters never faced an antagonist.

The struggle was desperate but brief.

For a moment or two they swayed up and down the cabin floor as closely locked together as two coiling serpents, and then the detective got the wrestler's twist upon his taller antagonist, and over, backward, Brevoort went, with terrific force, Peters adding his weight to the fall.

Speedily the detective released himself and snapped the handcuffs upon his prey.

Brevoort resisted not—he stirred not!

Alarmed, Peters examined him.

The Owl had escaped the hangman's hempen noose!

In falling he had stricken his head against one of the heavy stones, and the shock had fractured the skull.

Jason Brevoort had gone quickly to his last account with all his sins upon his head.

The detective rose to his feet, and regarded the stricken man thoughtfully.

"Well, it is dead, after all," he muttered. And then the precious document that Brevoort had toiled so to gain met his eyes.

He picked it up and examined it.

"I suppose I had better give this back to the lady; she was a trump; few gals in this world would be willing to pay such a sum for a man, but that Gray always was a lucky fellow. Miss Van Dyke can thank me for saving her a fortune, and all in the way of business, too."

And now, with the death of the last of the Owls—the total extinction of the firm of Brevoort and Brevoort, our story is done.

The evidence of Alma and Agnes was amply sufficient to release Gray from the danger in which the artful schemes of Brevoort had placed him, and when Peters arrived, bringing the precious document that carried with it the fate of the Little Montana mine, the astonishment of the superintendent was unbounded.

The withdrawal of Peters, who modestly declined to accept any reward for the important service which he had done, in returning the paper, left Alma and Gray alone.

Despite the difference in their positions, The Man from New York could no longer refrain from declaring the passion which burned within his heart for the girl for whom he had fought so bravely.

"Ah, Alma!" he exclaimed, "if you were not so rich and I was not so poor and such a scallywag besides!"

"Oh, Gilbert, you are the best and noblest of men!" she replied; "you fought for the orphan girl when she had no other friend; what is wealth to me compared to your life? Why, to have saved you from danger I would have gladly sacrificed everything that I possessed in the world. Remember what the poet says,

"Weight nothing against love—
Weight love against the world!"

THE END.

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